

# Feasibility of “Rent-a-Goat” Services to Manage Invasive Plants Regionally

Rubenstein School of the Environment and Natural Resources  
NR 206 Environmental Problem Solving  
Community Project Closing Report  
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Presented on 12/06/19

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### **Executive Summary**

The Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership (CVCP) is interested in installing a Rent-a-Goat program throughout the five municipalities under its jurisdiction as a non-herbicide solution for removing invasive plant species. We were tasked with the responsibility of determining the feasibility of a Rent-a-Goat program within the CVCP. We conducted 35 interviews with a variety of farmers, organizations, and businesses across the U.S. and Canada. A feasibility project was developed with a breakdown of the logistics of starting a Rent-a-Goat program and the specific costs, benefits, and concerns associated with it. Rent-a-Goat programs are relatively affordable to start, but they are difficult to maintain throughout a long period of time. A program should be run by a knowledgeable farmer that is familiar with the nature of goats as well as how to run a successful business. We advise the CVCP to move forward with reaching out to existing farms with goats. We think this is the best approach since it would be difficult for the CVCP to collectively own and manage a herd of goats themselves. In 2020, a Rent-a-Goat program known as “Goats on the Go” will be starting in the Burlington, Vermont area. It is in the CVCP’s best interest to reach out to this business to work in collaboration on invasive plant species management.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank our Graduate Teaching Assistant Alison Adams for her support and encouragement throughout the course of this project. We would also like to thank Ashley Parker, Town Manager of South Burlington, Vermont, for providing us with the opportunity to do this work. Lastly, we would like to thank the many goat-affiliated farmers, organizations, and businesses that so graciously took the time to speak to us, at times for hours on end.

## Introduction/Background

### *Our Community Partner*

The Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership (CVCP) is a group of municipalities and other community partners that recently formed in Vermont to tackle conservation and stewardship issues regionally. The partnership's foundation is comprised of five municipalities, including South Burlington, Williston, Shelburne, Hinesburg, and St. George. This partnership is still in its early stages, and the towns are eager to work together. Our community partner contact is the South Burlington City Project Manager Ashley Parker, who proposed this project with the Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership (CVCP) in mind. Our group attended and presented at CVCP meetings where town planners, managers and others were in attendance.

### *Background*

The Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership (CVCP) is in need of a non-herbicide solution for removing invasive plant species. According to the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, the second greatest threat to biodiversity --in Vermont and around the world-- is the proliferation of invasive species<sup>1</sup>. "The four direct threats invasive species pose include: out-competing native species, preying on native species, causing or carry disease, and preventing native species from reproducing<sup>2</sup>".

Rent-a-Goat services have been gaining popularity around the country. Rent-a-Goat programs typically involve goat farmers renting out herds of goats to help control invasive species<sup>3</sup>. Municipalities and individual homeowners alike are attracted to the program's

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<sup>1</sup> What are their impacts? (OAD). Retrieved from <https://vtinvasives.org/intro-to-invasives/what-are-their-impacts>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://vtinvasives.org/intro-to-invasives/what-are-their-impacts>

<sup>3</sup> RentAGoat. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://rentagoat.com/>

cost-effectiveness and eco-friendliness<sup>4</sup>. Using goats to reduce invasive species on both public and private lands eliminates the need for plastics and fossil fuel-powered mowing machines. We will be gathering information to help the Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership (CVCP) determine the feasibility of utilizing a Rent-a-Goat program to reduce the number of invasive plant species in the five municipalities it has jurisdiction over.

The CVCP has not conducted a feasibility study in the area of Rent-a-Goats. They are looking to understand whether or not a program like this would be feasible in the area. To inform our project and our partners, we will be exploring existing literature on Rent-a-Goat programs in the U.S. and we will be conducting interviews with established programs. We will then create a financial assessment estimating the potential costs of a Rent-a-Goat program in the CVCP as well as an overall feasibility report that will examine the likelihood of a Rent-a-Goat program's success with the CVCP. If the CVCP finds Rent-a-Goat to be a feasible option, they would like to educate and engage their residents, especially school groups, about the new program.

*Problem Statement:*

The CVCP needs more information to determine the feasibility of using a Rent-a-Goat program to control invasive species.

*Goal:*

Provide the CVCP with the information necessary to determine whether or not the Rent-a-Goat program is feasible for the five towns under its jurisdiction.

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<sup>4</sup> Zielinski, S. (2009, May 7). Google Rents Goats to Mow the Lawn. *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/google-rents-goats-to-mow-the-lawn-11402182/>

*Objectives:*

- Compile a list of community stakeholders to interview including: farmers, municipal employees, successful Rent-a-Goat programs, unsuccessful Rent-a-Goat programs
- Reach out to contacts to set up interviews
- Conduct interviews
- Analyze information from interviews and prepare a broad feasibility assessment to bring to the five town managers under the CVCP.

**Methods/Strategies**

*Interview Process*

Interviews with 35 goat farmers, organizations, and businesses were completed throughout the course of the semester. Our team reached out to our existing personal Rent-a-Goat contacts (i.e. UVM Extension, Green Goats) to get a better understanding of what information we needed to obtain from future interviews. These two contacts alone were able to give us clarity in what goes into creating a Rent-a-Goat program and provided us with additional businesses to contact. We also found contacts through basic Google searches and a Facebook group focused on the Rent-a-Goat community.

We used a series of preset questions to ask our interviewees (see Appendix A). However, we let the majority of the conversations flow naturally by skipping some questions or adding additional questions as needed. Interviewees were generally very excited to speak with our team and were very enthusiastic about the idea of a Rent-a-Goat program in Vermont.

### *Data Analysis*

Information from each interview was transcribed and distributed to the entire group using a shared Google Drive. Relevant data from the interviews were broken up into three main categories relevant to the objectives of the project: necessary steps and precautions for beginning a Rent-a-Goat program; financial considerations; and potential opportunities for educational outreach. Our team then used this information to create our Feasibility Plan and final presentation to the CVCP.

### *Resources*

This project would not have been successful without the utilization of a plethora of social resources. Our team uncovered a vast community of goat enthusiasts that extends beyond the borders of the United States. The various goat farmers, organization heads, and business people we spoke with are all apart of a greater network of passionate, innovative, and resourceful environmentalists. We utilized our own intrapersonal and social skills to be welcomed into this goat-centric community with open arms. Many of our contacts have had relations with one another in the past, and the majority of them were very willing to keep in touch as the CVCP as they continue to consider a Rent-a-Goat program.

### *Measure of Success*

The success of this project can be determined by the CVCP's confidence in our data. This project aimed to determine whether or not a Rent-a-Goat program is feasible for the CVCP to establish. If the CVCP is able to make an informed decision of whether or not they would like to pursue a Rent-a-Goat program based on the information we have provided, then our project has been successful.



## **Results/Deliverables**

After concluding our research and interviews, we have determined that it is feasible for the Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership to use goats as part of its invasive plant species management plan. This type of program is particularly likely to be successful as a rent-a-goat program known as “Goats on the Go” has plans to open in Vermont in 2020. Goats have shown to be effective prescribed grazers if there are concrete management plans in place, and this is a great opportunity for the CVCP. Detailed instructions on how the CVCP can establish a program within their jurisdiction can be found in our deliverable, the “Feasibility Plan” attached to this document.

Our Feasibility Plan provides the CVCP with a plethora of information collected from Rent-a-Goat programs across the United States and Canada. The document thoroughly explains what resources are required to start a Rent-a-Goat program, financial considerations to make before determining whether or not to pursue a project, and useful contacts and case studies for ensuring future support of the project. The data provided in the Feasibility Plan is substantial enough for the CVCP to determine whether or not they would like to pursue a Rent-a-Goat program.

*Was this project successful?*

After concluding our final meeting with Ashley Parker of the CVCP, we can confirm that the partnership is going to move forward with a Rent-a-Goat program. This work will likely continue to be completed in coordination with the NR 206 class throughout future

semesters. Because the CVCP has been able to confidently determine their desire to continue with a Rent-a-Goat program because of the data we have provided, our project has been successful.

### **Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion**

#### *Project Challenges and Achievements*

Throughout the life of our project we faced both challenges and successes. Some of the challenges included: a lack of existing rent-a-goat programs in Vermont and a knowledge of goat needs and invasive species required to create a long-term program. We also struggled because this was a research-based project but we were unable to apply our research in Chittenden County. Despite these challenges, based on our research we believe that a rent-a-goat program could be successful in addressing the CVCP's invasive species removal concerns. Rent-a-goat programs are taking off across the country and Vermont is well-slated to join in. With a Goats on the Go franchise coming to Chittenden county in 2020, the CVCP has the opportunity to pilot a goat grazing program. Our direct conversations and transmission of data with the CVCP is a strong testament to the success of our work. The CVCP has been extremely pleased with the outcomes of this project, and they are going to pursue a Rent-a-Goat program in the future.

#### *Suggestions for future work*

If the CVCP would like to continue their partnership with the Rubenstein school, we see this as a project that can continue into future semesters. We conducted the base research needed to understand what is required to start a Rent-a-Goat program. With a Rent-a-Goat program coming to Chittenden County in Spring 2020, we can see a future group of students monitoring a

pilot grazing program. On a small piece of municipally owned land, goats could be used to graze invasive species. The next group of students could monitor the re-growth and determine based-off the pilot if the CVCP could utilize a Rent-a-Goat program in other places.

To help the next group seamlessly transition, we will provide our professor with the link to our google drive. Here we have placed all of our research, class documents, and contact lists. This will allow another group to read through our materials to understand the basics of a Rent-a-Goat program. In addition, we have spoken with the folks who are hoping to bring a Rent-a-Goat program to Chittenden County and have let them know about student interest in the project. They will be on the look-out for another group to students contacting to partner with them next semester.

We have determined that it would be best if the next group focused on ecological research associated with a pilot grazing program. With consultation from the CVCP and Goats on the Go, the next group should assess a plot of land to be grazed. Once a plot is identified, the group should assess the function and values of the ecosystem and how they are being impacted by invasives. After this is determined, the group should measure the amount of invasives and regrowth both before and after goats are brought in to graze. We see the next group's main focus as helping to identify a pilot plot, determining the impacts of invasives, and measuring after a pilot is run.

## Appendix

### *Appendix A: Interview Questions*

- Name of business/program:
- Location:
- Why did you choose the location of your business/program?
- Who owns and manages the herd of goats?
- If your business/program location experiences an off season (winter) what do you do with the goats during that time?
- In what ways has your program been successful?
  - What caused that success?
- How long has your business been operating?
- What challenges have you faced with your Rent-a-Goat program?
  - When did these challenges occur?
- Approximately how much did it cost you to start your business?
  - Prolonged maintenance costs
  - Insurance costs
- Do you need to train your goats?
  - How do you prevent them from eating native species/encourage them to eat invasive species?