

Four-legged firefighters

An innovative shepherdess is working with Ojai residents to bring her fire-hardening and brush-clearance knowledge to the Ojai Valley.



By Austin Widger

Brittany “Cole” Bush is an urban shepherdess and regenerative-agriculture advocate born and raised in Southern California. Cole not only shepherds goats and sheep, but also people and projects. She hopes to use her passion for shepherding and ecology of the land she was raised on to help fight fires with hooves.

Her background is in environmental studies, with a degree in agricultural ecology from UC Santa Cruz. She became interested in land stewardship through livestock. Cole explained: “While I was in school, I worked with a rancher who was using what is called ‘holistic manage-

ment’ of sheep and goats to do restoration projects on his ranch. So he was using prescribed grazing, which is using goats to push back encroachment of invasive species like coyote brush, with the goal to encourage restoration of native grasslands; as well as reforesting redwoods on the ranch, using grazing as a tool to prime the understory of the forest.”

The rancher was restoring his ranch using grazing in a way that was very different from the traditional style of grazing. Rather than using the animals for meat and fiber, he used them to manage vegetation. Cole decided to take the knowl-



edge she learned from him to the East Bay Regional Parks District in the Bay Area. She made a bid for contract grazers to graze the parks to abate fire hazards. After winning the contract, Cole started Star Creek Land Stewards. She recalled: "When I started, there were about 1,200 animals and by the time I left, we were close to 3,000 animals. They were grazing, I was managing the grazing of several different bunches of herds around several different counties all over the Bay Area. We were getting paid to graze, to provide this grazing service."

This holistic approach to vegetation management with the rancher launched her career in 2010. Seeing the popularity of regenerative agriculture in Northern California, and the role of grazing in it, she said she realized she "wanted to bring the work that I started elsewhere back home. Southern California so needs it, so, essentially, in light of the increasing threat of fire, and how big the fires are getting, I was like I have to come back down south."

She sees Ojai as an incredible community and recognizes the opportunities to replicate in Southern California some of the projects she did in the Bay Area. A community-supported grazing program is a model other communities in the state can embrace.

Ojai native and permaculturist Connor Jones connected with Cole to discuss this possibility around the time of the Thomas

Fire. "Together we really started envisioning what it would look like to have more of a community approach to having a grazing program," Cole said. "The goal is really to create a whole band and perimeter around all of the built environment around Ojai so we could actually just walk our animals and graze along. Walk and then graze instead of having to truck and trailer them."

Cole and Connor approached the Ojai Fire Safe Council next. Executive director Chris Danch was excited to adopt the grazing program as part of its fire-risk mitigation roadmap. The Fire Safe Council is facilitating the community outreach and funding for the project, which it is modeling after a similar program executed by the Marin Fire Safe Council. It is one of several local partners on the project. Cole said: "Through the community of like-minded folks, Connor and I connected and it was a collaborative envisioning to start something like this. We asked ourselves, how do we start? It needs to be community-supported, it needs community stakeholders that have leadership and land stewardship and support fire resiliency in Ojai. We identified our first best partner would be the Fire Safe Council. It has been successful so far."

Danch enthused: "The prescribed grazing program falls under the heading of fuel reductions, which itself fits into the larger comprehensive strategy for risk mitigation. It can be economically self-sustaining after a while. It can improve the ecology of the area. It can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by not using power tools."

The target start date to begin the grazing is when the green brush turns to gold. The animals should be on the ground by the time the brush turns dry in May. Cole's company, Shepherdess Land and Livestock Company, will be carrying out the community-supported grazing program.

"The success of the project really lies within the preplanning, and identifying what the goals are for each site," Cole elaborated. "That's what differentiates this type of grazing from your traditional ranching livestock grazing, is that each site has a goal. Some of them are going to be habitat-restoration goals, which are going to be a little different than managing vegetation for fire hazard. Our goal is not to just get rid of all of the vegetation. The goal is to increase fire resiliency, the



health of that particular ecology, to create more fuel breaks, give more space for fighting fires."

A lot of the workload is the planning for the animals to be there. The grazing style is high-density, high-impact, low-duration grazing. Basically, a lot of animals will be there quickly, preventing long-term damage to the area. They try to mimic how wild herds move through landscapes, Cole said. Temporary electric fences keep them contained and keep predators away. However, the company also shepherds with border collies. Cole said: "We'll be working with dogs to move the animals and surgically graze. We call this prescribed grazing because it's essentially surgical. We know exactly where we want to go and we try to focus that grazing where we want to go, and so we can use electric fences or dogs."

Danch added: "This is a great tool to be developed in our area. It isn't used enough. It is also important to distinguish between a prescribed grazing program and just any kind of grazing program. The skill of the shepherd or shepherdess

is really key. It takes a lot of training and learning and sophistication to do this correctly. So a prescribed grazing program is different than just a grazing program."

Support is needed from community stakeholders, larger stakeholders, private and public entities, the city of Ojai, the county of Ventura, the Land Conservancy, the Ojai Foundation, private landowners and schools, Cole said. To garner that, supporters are planning to hold a town hall to answer questions about the program and engage the community. Cole said: "So a town hall meeting, which will also be a community fundraiser event. From there, we're also going to need to create the town overlay maps of where the grazing will initially begin, a series of pilot demonstration sites for proof of concept. So a map overlay of the grazing program sites on both public and private lands. Then education for employees ... staff education for folks like the C.R.E.W. and the Land Conservancy. People who are going to be working with the contract grazer."

"The long-term goal is for Ojai to be a

premier example of how a community can come together and adopt and create a program that's multi-stakeholder, both private and public entities, to create something that is an ecological, careful approach to grazing, to become an example to other towns. The success of that would be measured with a grazing curve throughout the fire season, for up to six months, without having to get on a truck and trailer to be transported from one contract to another, but can contiguously graze to create a whole buffer zone around town ... short-term is, this year a measure of success would be to create demonstration pilot projects to keep a grazing herd on the ground. Demonstrate projects in fire prevention, habitat restoration and invasive species management, and education."

With the determination of Cole, the Fire Safe Council and the Ojai community as a whole, these goals will be achieved without question. The can-do spirit of the Ojai Valley can once again help be an innovator for fire resilience in all of Southern California. ■