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From Farm to Sustainable

M. Linda Lee

Local farmer Steve Wood with one of the new tenants of Furman's solar farm.

From Farm to Sustainable

BY M. LINDA LEE

Gas-powered lawn mowers are notorious for their dirty emissions, with studies showing just one can spew as much pollution into the atmosphere in an hour as a 100-mile car trip. Sheep aren't notorious for much of anything outside of being responsible for itchy sweaters, eating lots of grass and docilely following people around.

So when Steve Wood approached Furman with the idea of having his animals take over vegetation maintenance duties around its recently installed 743-kilowatt solar farm, it wasn't long until there was a new, ahem, lambscaping company on the job. In late May, 12 sheep – four ewes and eight lambs – took up residence on the plot. Their only job is to do what they do best: Eat.

According to Wood, the arrangement is a perfect "environmentally friendly synthesis between high and low technology." It also ends the disconnect between the weekly mowing – which accounts for up to 5 percent of the nation's air impurities – and the six acres dedicated to reducing Furman's greenhouse gas emissions. A couple of winters ago, Wood, who grazes St. Croix Hair Sheep and practices sustainable farming on his land 10 miles from Furman, noticed the university's solar installation taking shape while on his way to campus for a swim. It dawned on him that his sheep would be the ideal animals to trim the grass because not only do they eat a wide variety of species they're also, unlike goats, not prone to chewing everything in sight, such as solar panels.

Wood reached out to gauge the university's interest and his proposal eventually found its way to the Shi Center for Sustainability. "I got excited about the potential partnership," recalls Laura Bain, the center's associate director of sustainability assessment, who steers the project on the university side. "We thought it was an innovative partnership and a cool way to foster community involvement – and who doesn't want to hang out with sheep?"

It took almost a year to work out the legalities and logistics. At the solar farm, a water line and a high fence were already in place, so all that remained to ready the plot was to add signage and block the few gaps under the fence to protect the sheep from predators.

JEREMY FLEMING

Twelve St. Croix sheep, four ewes and their eight lambs, will be calling the solar farm home for the foreseeable future.

JEREMY FLEMING

"It's expensive to cut the grass beneath the angled panels because they are only two feet off the ground at the low end, so you have to go in with a weed-whacker," Bain explains. She expects that using the sheep will prove less expensive while eliminating the need for gasoline and motors. An added bonus: The animals provide free fertilizer.

The sheep will remain on the solar farm until grass growth slows in winter, at which point Wood will bring them home until spring. Wood cares for the sheep, stopping by several times a week to check their health, make sure they have fresh water, and bring them mineral supplements. "Other than that, grass is all they need," he says.

Bain plans to put up a webcam at the solar farm in the near future so folks can watch the sheep remotely. Next fall, she hopes to integrate the project into the university's curriculum by working with faculty to develop research projects that can provide applied learning opportunities for students, while also offering applicable project assessment and guidance.

As far as anyone knows, Furman's pilot program is the first solar grazing project in South Carolina. "Once we find out how it works for us," Bain notes, "we can let others know how they can combine agriculture with sustainable energy production and find those partnerships in their own communities." The project will also further Furman's goal of being carbon neutral by 2026, with the solar farm expected to reduce Furman's greenhouse gas emissions by about 3 percent annually.

"We're not trying, like some suggest, to revert to the way things were centuries ago," Wood adds. "We're going forward to the 21st century and doing it in a sustainable way." You could say it's the sheep of things to come. ●

NOW

Reflection on Furman as it is now

Before matriculating to Furman, I took a gap year to live at a refugee center in Kiev, Ukraine. During my time there, I led an English as a Second Language class, fitness program, and wellness initiative for the center's residents, nearly all of whom had fled their homes due to escalating military tension between eastern Ukraine and Russia in 2014.

When I came to Furman, I was unsure how I would be able to further my interest in the global refugee crisis, as there were no clubs or classes devoted exclusively to this issue. Fortunately, I landed an internship the summer after freshman year at World Relief, a refugee resettlement agency in Atlanta tasked with orienting newly arrived refugees to life in America. I soon discovered that two of my fellow interns were also Furman students.

Over the course of the summer, the three of us put our heads together and brainstormed ways that we could more effectively engage the Furman community on the refugee crisis. Fast forward to today, when the three of us – and the faculty and staff who helped us along the way – are proud to look back on a successful year of immersive educational and service-oriented experiences designed to humanize the refugee plight.

Through these experiences, the refugee crisis has emerged at the fore of not only my personal interests but also my professional pursuits. Originally a premed student, I have since discovered my passion for public health, specifically as it pertains to refugee and migrant populations, and I now aspire to get a Ph.D. in epidemiology with a concentration in forced migration.

Thanks to the generous support of the Furman Internships Office, I am fortunate to pursue this passion through a summer research experience at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and New York State Psychiatric Institute, where I am doing graduate-level research on psychosocial well-being among refugee children. I look forward to taking classes next fall in Stockholm on public health and forced migration through the DIS Study Abroad in Scandinavia program, which includes a weeklong trip to the U.N. headquarters in Geneva to study immigration policy.

I realize now that what I had perceived during my freshman year as a dearth of opportunities was simply negative space waiting to be filled. I am grateful for the freedom Furman has given me to deeply pursue an interest of mine while also sparking a newfound dialogue on campus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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