

In the Green

**California's Ryan Indart Grazes
His Way to Prosperity**



Ryan Indart has a problem he's never had before. After drenching rains and substantial mountain snowfall brought an end to countless years of drought in his home state, he stands in a solar array in the San Joaquin Valley and sees only two things: green grass and solar panels. More specifically, green grass shading solar panels.

Ryan's got 1,500 sheep on this site and their job is to clear that grass from the landscape, but these highly proficient eaters have quite the mountain to climb for the first time since they began grazing such sites in 2018. Recent weather events have been a complete 180 from the vast drought California farmers and ranchers had grown accustomed to. Add that additional moisture to the valley's already fertile soil and the grass is reproducing at the rate of a Finnsheep ewe and growing more prolifically than a Texel lamb.

"I've got all of these projects that I've procured and contracted in the last three years – drought years – and now the vegetation has tripled or quadrupled," Ryan says. "So, the sheep are going slower and I really don't have enough sheep. It's definitely added some anxiety and some stress. I told my wife just the other day, I'd much rather be busy trying to find more sheep and worrying about how to get all the work done, than busy wondering how I'm going to get the sheep fed and how we're going to pay the bills. This is a nicer problem to have, and really the complete opposite from the problems we've had nearly the entire time we've owned the sheep. Projects that I can't graze I can usually out-source to my partners."

Ryan bought the family's sheep operation from his parents in 2009 and lost money more often than not in the early years.

"This was really a grassroots, boot-strap, necessity is the mother of invention kind of thing for us," he admits. "If we wanted to survive, we needed to do something different. I wanted to be able to pay my employees and provide for my family with the sheep. I don't know how producers in California can survive on just lamb and wool these days."

As a farmer – his family has always grown almonds, cherries, oranges, barley and wheat – and sheep producer, Ryan would love to see many of the thousands of acres now covered in solar panels still growing crops. But running sheep in among the panels is the next best option for preserving agricultural lands.

"Some of the land they've built on is marginal soil, but marginal soil in central California can still produce a lot of food," he says. "This is some of the best sheep feed in the world. Even in drought years, it's full of nutrition. There was just less of it back then."

LEADING THE WAY

"I think we're the first sheep ranching operation in the Western states to really go all in on this," Ryan says. "I'm trying to be a leader and bring some other sheep producers in with me. The biggest downside right now is that I've got too much feed and not enough animals."

"We're doing the same thing we've done for generations, but now we're just doing it under solar panels. I never thought in a million years I'd be doing something like this. The ag community and solar operators aren't always aligned. I want to protect our agricultural interests and lands, but I realize that there are different ways to do that. I'm a chame-



leon in a sense. I don't agree with all of the policies that are enacted in my state, but I have to adapt my business to work with them. Some of these lands should be irrigated and growing crops, but that's not happening. So, what's the next best thing? I can graze sheep on these lands and in addition to the energy they produce, we can produce lamb and wool to feed and clothe this country."

While solar panels produce clean energy that most of the state's residents can feel good about, grazing those lands provides Ryan with the opportunity to tout the benefits of animal agriculture, which includes reducing emissions (compared to mowing) and the use of harsh pesticides in maintaining the site.

A California native, Ryan seriously considered uprooting his family and joining sheep producer friends somewhere in the Intermountain West. It isn't an easy life no matter where you do it, but his involvement with ASI (he's now the Region VIII representative to the ASI Executive Board), the National Lamb Feeders Association and Western Range had shown him that other Western states tend to be more ag-friendly than what he sees coming out of the state capitol in Sacramento, Calif. But the lifestyle won out. An accomplished water polo player, he's watched the two oldest of his four girls follow in his footsteps as they head into their teenage years. Wyoming might be more ag friendly, but good luck finding a water polo team to play for.

"Clovis (Calif.) is a great place to raise a family, and our kids are really flourishing in the schools there," says Ryan, who's also the assistant water polo coach at Clovis North High School. "Fortunately, God blessed us to start this solar grazing business and that's allowed us to

stay in California."

Solar grazing and targeted grazing are growing industries throughout the country, but they've taken off exponentially in California to mitigate the state's extreme fire conditions in recent years. Because of that, Ryan believes every sheep producer in the state should be looking at these opportunities.

"Some guys just aren't interested in branching out and developing this new revenue stream, but in this state we have to be open to some new things to make it work. We have the highest labor costs in the country. Sheep producers who aren't actively looking for grazing opportunities are really missing out, because they are everywhere. You just have to sell the benefits of your business."

LABOR SOLUTION

Because Ryan's business includes grazing, lamb and wool production, tractor work and grain production, he was able to successfully transition away from the salaried H-2A range shepherd job classification and into the H-2A hourly job classification. This allowed him to distribute his human resource dollars across multiple revenue centers and have his employees learn a variety of other new job skills – a benefit to both the employee and the employer. Also, Ryan's family business farms almonds, cherries and oranges – crops which his H-2A employees can help attend to.

"With the range shepherd qualification, I was really tied to having them do only shepherd work," he says. "My guys are happy getting to do a lot of different things. They like the diversity of the work. Some of

them just want to herd the sheep, and that's fine. But most are ready to do different things and learn new skills to provide for their families."

The change was especially beneficial after the California Wool Growers Association lost its legal battle to exempt shepherders from the state's overtime rules that were put into place a few years ago. Herders hired through the H-2A program cost more in California than anywhere else in the United States.

WOOL GRAZERS

Other than lambing, Ryan's flock of Targhee-Finn crosses spends most of the year on solar sites. That'll be especially true in 2023 as they look to mow down the suddenly overgrown sites. The need for less land is an added benefit for a producer who's expanding his flock on a yearly basis these days.

"We've got 3,500 ewes and I think we could get to 5,000 easily in the next few years," he says. "My only constraint is the amount of alfalfa pasture we have to lamb on. There's nothing else holding us back."

And while many grazing operations lean heavily on hair sheep for their smaller frames and parasite resistance, Ryan says his flock is just as well-suited for the work.

"We've always had wool sheep, and I don't see any reason to change that," he says. "The lambs I produce are highly sought after by the ethnic market in the Midwest. They grow fast because they've got some Texel in them, but they don't get as big as a Rambouillet or a Suffolk. They produce a medium-coarse wool and all of that goes to Mike Corn at Roswell Wool. I don't have any direct channels on that because I don't need anything else to keep me busy. But I'm happy to have three revenue streams from the lamb, the wool and the grazing." 🐏



Center of page: Current conditions in California solar sites that have yet to be fully grazed. Above: An area that has been fully grazed for the year.