I. Project Title

Barriers in transition to contract-grazing by established sheep and goat producers

II. Project Completion Date

Ongoing (expected completion in March 2020)

III. Student(s), Department(s), and Major(s)

Erin Campbell-Craven  
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Animal Science Department  
Master of Science, Agriculture with Specialization in Animal Science

IV. Faculty Advisor and Department

Dr. Marc Horney  
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V. Cooperating Industry, Agency, Non-Profit, or University Organization(s)

California Woolgrower’s Association

VI. Executive Summary

This is an interdisciplinary thesis project with advisors associated with the Cal Poly Animal Science and Sociology departments, as well as University of California Cooperative Extension. With the cooperation of the California Woolgrower’s Association, I am conducting quantitative and qualitative research assessing the state of the sheep and goat contract-grazing industry within California through a series of surveys and in-depth interviews with participating producers. With
the results of these surveys, I aim to identify successful practitioners of contract-grazing throughout the state, identify commonalities, and construct a series of management recommendations for established sheep and goat producers who wish to pursue contract-grazing as an alternate source of revenue for their businesses.

With the decreased viability of the wool, fiber, and lamb industries in the United States, established sheep and goat producers are searching for production alternatives. In addition, interest in contract-grazing for fire abatement has grown over the last few years with the increased prevalence of fires occurring throughout the state of California. I am investigating the barriers to entry into contract-grazing, specifically for fire prevention and abatement, by established California sheep and goat producers - focusing on the transition to new business models and necessary changes in the decision-making process by producers new to working closely with government agencies and NGOs. Ultimately, the purpose of the project is to:

1) Evaluate the current state of the contract-grazing industry within the state of California
2) Look for commonalities among successful contract-grazing practitioners
3) Identify outstanding barriers to entry into the contract-grazing business
4) Provide sheep and goat producers with tangible management recommendations on the practicality of entering the contract-grazing business as an alternative to conventional sheep and goat production

The Baker-Koob funds were used to perform in-person interviews to supplement quantitative information collected through online surveys. Baker-Koob funding for travel allowed me to interview a variety of sheep and goat ranchers grazing solar farms and vineyards to reduce vegetation on-site, reducing fire risk and saving money that would otherwise be spent on mechanical vegetation removal. The information gained through these surveys will be incorporated into a thesis to fulfill the requirements to obtain a Master of Agriculture with a concentration in Animal Science. Results of the surveys are to be included in a paper submitted for publication by the Journal of Rangeland Ecology & Management and Rangelands magazine. Additionally, results and recommendations will be included in a white paper for dissemination to the California Woolgrower's Association and other interested parties.

VII. Major Accomplishments

(1) Completed interviews with several land managers grazing solar farms and vineyards for vegetation management

(2) Attended the Ovines in the Vines conference, an intensive field day for vineyard managers and sheep ranchers interested in grazing vineyards for vegetation management

(3) Completed draft of a thesis to be reviewed by committee in the Winter Quarter of 2020, with plans to defend in March 2020

VIII. Expenditure of Funds

In July 2019, I billed $297.27 for lodging at a hotel and $176.90 in mileage to visit two solar farms with a representative of an environmental consulting company. At the request of those solar farms, all information relating to these visits must be deidentified in any published reports. In December
2019, I billed $316.80 in lodging to attend the Ovines in the Vines conference, presented by the Grazing School of the West. During this visit, I interviewed several ranchers cooperating with vineyards in the Central Coast to graze sheep in vineyards during periods on non-growth.

Originally, funding was requested to travel to the American Society of Animal Science Western Section annual meeting in June 2019 to report on the results of the study, but interviewee conflicts necessitated an extension of the project, so these funds were not used.

IX. Impact on Student Learning

Baker-Koob funding allowed me to conduct my first in-depth qualitative interviews with ranchers grazing for vegetation management. Although I have worked in-depth with farmers and ranchers in the past, I have never conducted taped interviews in a formal setting, which were then transcribed and analyzed using techniques gained from participation in an independent study in Sociology.

I was also introduced to several farmers and ranchers participating in grazing for vegetation management secondhand as a result of traveling in-person to grazing sites. I would not have had a chance to meet these secondary contacts if I were to have restricted my data collection to an anonymous online survey.

Most importantly, the allocation of Baker-Koob funds has allowed me to make a significant step toward meeting the requirements for my master’s thesis.