

RUMINANT PRODUCTION & MARKETING

OPTIMIZING PRODUCTION ON PASTURE, PLUS VALUE-ADDED RETAIL MARKETING.

This printout and the assorted opinions stated within are from Boggs Farms of Sugartown, LA who cautions that not all the proposals discussed will be suitable for every livestock operation. More at: www.louisianalamb.com

Carefully Determine Your Farms Most Suitable Product, Then Find or Develop Profitable Outlets for That Unique Product.

Long before starting our retail lamb meat marketing program, we determined that our farm was best suited for the production of low quality warm-season perennial grasses and assorted weeds. We then tried to determine what meat animal could best serve as both the harvesting machinery and as the market vehicle for those forage assets. Complicating the assignment was the need for the animals to graze with low inputs of cash and labor while under the adverse conditions of very high humidity and extreme parasitic infestation.

This journey has led through beef cattle (100+ years and continuing), goats (now discontinued), and on to the production of 12 to 16 month old pasture raised intact Katahdin (hair sheep) males with a live weight of about 110 pounds at the time of processing. If this description does not fit in with your definition of what "lamb" should be -- remember that most Farmer's Market shoppers are only vaguely familiar with lamb and are usually somewhat flexible in their taste expectations (except that it better be good!!). They do require that the lamb be wholesome, locally and humanely produced with minimal feed (which contains no animal byproducts), without using hormones or antibiotics, and that it be logically priced (yes, they understand that you have to make a profit).

The fact that our yearlings have lived somewhat longer than the average market lamb is comforting to many shoppers. As an additional enticement to purchase, our lambs have never been inoculated, vaccinated, injected, or fed any type of drug whatsoever.

The economically crucial point I'm trying to make is that you have to sell "The Lamb" which your pastures are best suited to produce, and that each farm's pasture environment is different. However, no matter what your farm produces best, it will not please everyone. Some new buyers will become loyal customers and some will not return.

Note that this environment-controls-production philosophy, while not new, is the exact opposite of the more common adage of "Find a market and then produce for it." You can profitably produce only what your pastures dictate -- then you have to sell that product to potential customers one by one.

An additional reality that must be taken into consideration is the fact that only a small fraction of the general public will ever become regular lamb patrons. This requires utilizing a Market that serves a sizeable population and which is also within reasonable driving distance of the farm.

Twice per month we go to the Red Stick Farmer's Market in Baton Rouge (Year 2004 City Pop. 222,000 and Met. Pop. 752,000 with a one-way driving distance of 145 miles); plus once per month we also go to the Charlestown Farmer's Market in Lake Charles (Year 2000 City Pop. 71,000 and Met. Pop. 184,000 with a one-way driving distance of 60 miles). I consider the long drive to Baton Rouge to be the practical maximum, and the smallish population of the Lake Charles area to be the practical minimum -- although there are undoubtedly exceptions.

A major, easily overlooked expense that also must be considered in any proposed market feasibility study is transportation (farm truck operational costs are 35 - 55 cents per mile). In addition to the distances mentioned above, I drive 45 one-way miles to the nearest Inspected and Certified processing facility to which I take our live lambs, and then back again to pick up the retail-ready, wrapped, weighed, labeled, priced, and frozen meat packages. Before and after each trip to Market, I also drive 10 one-way miles to the nearest meat market to retrieve and return my display freezer of meat from their Commissary since I am not approved for a Commissary at my home and can not store meat destined for public sale.

We are at the Red Stick Farmer's Market in downtown Baton Rouge on Fifth Street between Main and North Streets from 8:00 AM - 12 Noon on the first and third Saturdays of the month, year-round, rain or shine.

We are at the Charlestown Farmer's Market in downtown Lake Charles on Bilbo Street between Kirby and Iris Streets from 7:30 AM - 12 Noon on the second Saturday of the month, year-round, rain or shine.

Introduction to Boggs Farms

Boggs Farms is a forage based sheep and cattle business that has been operating in eastern Beauregard Parish in southwest Louisiana for more than 125 years. We sell individual fresh frozen packages of pasture raised Lamb for delicious dining.

Our sheep are ecologically raised – meaning that Boggs Farms is operated in a manner that is most beneficial to both the environment and the flock. The environment is carefully protected and the needs of the flock are diligently met.

The two major needs of our flock are: 1) lots of fresh green grass which requires the intermittent use of commercial fertilizers due to the low fertility of the soils in our area, and 2) protection from parasites which requires the occasional use of an FDA approved oral medication.

Meeting these two vital flock needs rule out the use of the phrase “organic.” The organic production of lamb in hot, humid Louisiana is not economically feasible.

Our Lambs are always hormone and antibiotic free – as well as totally free of drug residue since we rigorously observe the withdrawal period required between the date of any oral medical treatment for parasites and the date of their processing and packaging.

The sheep contentedly graze year round in the pastures and are rarely fed hay or grain – this extra feeding occurring only during temporary periods of weather related fresh grass shortages.

Their normal diet of fresh natural forages maximizes their Omega-3 and Conjugated Linoleic Acid (CLA) content for healthful dietary contributions to our customers. Medical professionals feel that these two fatty acids enhance the disease resistance and general health of all those who include grass-fed meats in their diets.

Our sheep are a breed of hair sheep developed in the USA strictly for meat production. They do not have wool or the wool lanolin that can cause strong flavors in the meat of the other sheep breeds. Katahdin hair sheep have a mild, sweet, gourmet flavor. Our Lamb is a “Certified Product of Louisiana.”

Our Entry into the Retail Selling of Our Lamb Meat

In the Southcentral Katahdin Association Newsletter of August 2003, I wrote an article entitled "Lamb Marketing," which challenged our members to seek "clients who dine on lamb," rather than being satisfied with "customers who merely eat lamb." The difference was described as Profit.

Accordingly, in September 2004, we started selling cuts of our Lamb in individual shrink wrapped and frozen packages at the Red Stick Farmer's Market in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The BR metropolitan area has a population of nearly 500,000 - including many who are upscale in their food preferences and discretionary spending capabilities.

We promote our Lambs as "Something you can't get anywhere else." Our six major selling points are: 1. The Lambs are all bred, born, and raised on our farm and are in our control from conception to consumption. We know exactly what is in them - and more importantly, what's not in them, 2. They have never been implanted with hormones or treated with antibiotics, 3. Nor have they ever been injected, vaccinated, or inoculated with any type of drug whatsoever, 4. Or given feed containing antibiotics or animal byproducts. 5. The lambs are all raised on our pastures with purchased feed offered only occasionally to acclimate them to the loading pens, and during short-term weather-related forage shortages. This diet of predominantly fresh green forages increases the meats content of the desirable Omega-3 fatty acids, and finally 6. They're "10,000 Miles Fresher!"

We explain to our potential customers that we can't use the term "drug free" because of the need to treat the Lambs for internal parasites using approved oral anthelmintics; but we do emphasize that the meat is totally free of drug residue since we rigorously observe the FDA withdrawal period between treatment and processing. Most of them accept this if it is carefully explained.

Obviously, we can't use "organically raised" either; so we use the phrase Ecologically Raised, which means that the sheep are raised in a manner most advantageous to both the environment and the flock. The environment is carefully protected, and the needs of the flock are diligently met.

In addition to our regular cuts of Lamb, we have developed two outstanding proprietary Lamb Sausages, and we sell wild cherry, sassafras, and hickory wood grilling sticks for smoke flavoring enhancement

The good news summary is: Our hopes and expectations have been nicely exceeded. Shoppers have been numerous and receptive, sales brisk, feedback positive, prices good, and profits improved.

The downside summary is: All the efforts associated with getting approvals from the Farmer's Market and from the Health Department, the purchases of equipment and product liability insurance, plus a score of other details required to get everything "lined up" took several months and was occasionally exasperating even though everyone was very cooperative. The initial investment was quite significant, locating an inspected and certified processor who was willing and competent - then working with them to develop and maintain a suitable product line was tedious - and the ever continuing operational exertions of time, travel, and energy are rather high. Also, I didn't feel comfortable starting this project until I owned a flock large enough to reliably supply my hoped-for demand.

An endeavor of this type is not for everyone. Overall I regard it as laborious and time consuming, but interesting and profitable enough to continue.

Remember, Lamb production is where the fun is, but Lamb marketing is where the profit is.

Wintering Sheep for \$2.20 a Month

The purpose of this article is to advocate the value of turnips for ovine grazing to those folks willing to read on. It describes how in 2001/2002 I wintered sheep for a monthly cost of \$2.20 each on well-fertilized turnip and ryegrass pasture with no hay or feed. Unfortunately my experiences won't be applicable to everyone.

The estimates of forage production, sheep weights, and weight gain are just that -- estimates. However, my total wintering cost of \$2.20 per month per sheep is a Fact not affected by any errors of estimation.

Ryegrass is the pasture crop of choice for wintering stock in the Gulf South. However, 50 pounds of Purple Top Turnip seed that cost \$44.50 produced much more grazing during the period of October 24, 2001, through February 18, 2002, than did 1700 pounds of Jackson Ryegrass seed that cost \$663.00. The grazing stock was 230 hair sheep of assorted age and size.

The turnips and ryegrass were planted together on the same 34 acres of relatively well-prepared seedbed on September 15, 2001.

October 24, 2001, is the date the ryegrass and turnips were "ready" to start grazing; and February 18, 2002, is the date when the ryegrass was deemed essentially grazed away and the weather favorable for refertilization of the ryegrass due to the apparent arrival of spring.

Although the ryegrass was in fairly short supply by February 18, 2002, lots of turnip roots remained in prime edible condition so the grazing continued. Lambing had begun on February 1, 2002.

I read that there are 167,200 turnip seed per pound. Assuming 70% of them sprout, survive, grow, and are grazed; this would be 5,852,000 plants on 34 acres or 3.96 plants per square foot. Visual inspection confirmed this. Also assume an average weight for tops and roots of one half pound at the time of consumption (the consumed plant weight averaged over 4 months of grazing --- some weighed an ounce when grazed on October 24, 2001, and many weighed 2-3 pounds by Christmas 2001). Finally assume an average 85% moisture content.

These assumptions indicate that the turnip production was 12,909 pounds of dry matter per acre. I suspect that this is 3-4 times the ryegrass production for the same period. Ryegrass growth on my farm was probably the best ever in September and October, but well below normal in Nov/Dec/Jan/Feb.

The seed and fertilizer costs for these 118 days of grazing were \$1985.91. That amounts to \$2.20 per sheep per 30-day month. Again, no hay or feed was used.

If the 230 sheep averaged 130 pounds at the mid point of this grazing period, the cost would be \$0.0005628 per pound per day. In bovine terms this would be \$16.88 for a 1000 pound cow for a month. This seems kind of high to me. However, the next 90 days of grazing will be less expensive since the ryegrass will be vigorously resurrected by the February 18, 2002, addition of \$18.36 per acre of nitrogen.

I thought I'd estimate the cost of gain. I guessed that each of the 230 sheep gained 25 pounds during these 118 days. This is 0.21 pounds per day (ppd). Many of these gains were associated with gestational development. This would be a flock total gain of 5,750 pounds at a cost of 35 cents spent for seed and fertilizer per pound gained. The pounds per acre (PPA) of gain would be 169.

This seems very high in view of the fact that we had four weaned bull calves on 2.5 acres of ryegrass in 1997/98 that gained 4.03 ppd each (916 PPA) in 142 days at a total cost of 12 cents per pound of gain. The calves also had no hay or grain.

I assume the "high" cost of gain is because wintering a lot of pregnant ewes is not a weight gain project, and that a pound of fetal development growth is probably a lot less forage efficient than a pound of juvenile meat/bone/fat growth.

The stocking rate was also calculated. 230 sheep averaging 130 pounds on 34 acres is 879 pounds of stock per acre. By comparison, when we were doing the LSU beef grazing project, we liked to start with a stocking rate of no more than 600 PPA and try to gain at least 600 PPA in five months.

There was surprisingly little waste or spoilage of turnip top or root. Turnips are apparently "good food" since the ewes are mostly very fat after lambing. I intend to plant turnips on this same acreage as long as possible -- so please send some plant disease/pest experts my way. This fall I will experiment with rutabagas as well. Anyone want to recommend an unrelated crop with similar productivity?

Incidentally, I no longer recommend turnips in ryegrass for bovines (I used to plant 0.2 PPA of seed); because a few cow turnip-fanatics will destroy the ryegrass by trampling in search of turnips. There was no such destruction with the 230 sheep (and one goat and one llama).

Our Assorted Retail Meat Marketing Experiences

ON-FARM MEAT SALES >> I thought I'd record my experiences of on-farm meat sales catering to whoever happened to show up. The customers were from several ethnic groups who usually came because of having seen the sheep while driving down the highway, and then by word of mouth sharing of the sheep farm location with friends.

Although I originally tried to cultivate these sales, I have long since abandoned it - and in fact - now have a large prominent sign in the driveway (and on my Website) announcing NO sheep for sale!

It was a cause of annoyance which exceeded the monetary rewards; although a more patient, more tolerant person might find it worthwhile since the demand is definitely there if you're willing to accommodate it.

The problems were that they always showed up unannounced (usually on Sunday morning). "They" being defined as 3 to 4 men, only one of whom would speak in broken English. They would never reveal their name, domestic address, or country of origin (maybe that was none of my business?).

Additionally, they expected the butcher lambs to immediately be brought in from the pasture; and then upon selecting one and asking the price, would want to argue about the price (no matter what it was). I was unwilling to waste time haggling and would state that the price was firm: Pay it or leave. While none ever left, they obviously did not appreciate the direct approach to pricing.

Then the worst part would begin - and I shall not elaborate - suffice to say that it never appeared that any of these folks had experience in killing a lamb, much less in skinning and cutting one up, and that these tasks were accomplished inefficiently and with what I regarded as very poor hygiene.

Before abandoning this market altogether, I tried to improve their chances of success by providing sharp knives, a meat saw, a rope/pulley/gambrel, water hose, cutting table, plastic garbage can for the offal, etc., but it didn't help much.

This market can probably be developed just about anywhere, primarily via word of mouth after a few successful sales. Just be prepared for what I might best describe as "culture clash."

QUESTION >> "How many whole lambs do you feel you have to sell to justify setting up at a Farmer's Market?"

Of all the many things I investigated, pondered, and worried about during the 12 - 15 month period of thought and calculation that preceded my 2004 entry into the Farmer's Market (FM) game, that was not one of them. While lambs-sold-per-month is a critical factor in the overall success of any FM venture, it is an item over which you have little or no control - so why add that calculation to your pre-market worries?

All FM's have some pent up demand for lamb, and more demand can be created by the effective marketing of a superb product, but lambs-sold-per-month is, in my opinion, a function of the number and type of weekly patrons at any particular FM, and is more or less fixed.

If I may lift three sentences (out of context) from my Website, they are:

1. No matter what your farm produces best, it will not please everyone. Some new buyers will become loyal customers of your lamb meat and some will not return.
2. You can profitably produce only what your pastures dictate -- then you have to sell that product to potential customers one by one.
3. An additional reality that must be taken into consideration is the fact that only a small fraction of the general public will ever become regular lamb patrons.

I do not believe there is any type of marketing survey that could reliably predict lamb demand, either existing or creatable. You have to focus on those items that are within your control, make the FM commitment, and hope for the best on lambs-sold-per-month.

The most important factor within your control is pricing. I will elaborate on that next.

SELECTION OF CUTS AND PRICING OF MEAT >> After nearly three years of FM experience, listed below are the 11 lamb cuts that we sell (we once offered 17 cuts). You may be surprised that we don't offer Lamb Chops. The reason is lack of demand -- probably because if you do find "Lamb" in your local meat case, it's most likely Chops.

We usually sell out of Racks, Shanks, and Crown Roasts quickly; so they're probably due for a price increase. I plan to start offering a 7 to 8 lb "Family Grilling Pack" containing Mignon, Patties, Sausage, and Riblets (new) -- all pre-seasoned and ready to Thaw & Throw (on the grill).

At the prices below, a pasture raised yearling (Yes, my customers know they're yearlings and not lambs.) having a hot hanging carcass weight (HHCW) of 50 - 55 pounds will average at least \$330 in retail package price with total processing costs (live lamb to frozen packages) running \$55 - \$65 each.

Retail carcass value varies somewhat depending on the cuts needed for inventory replacement. In other words, are we grinding lamb for Ground Lamb at \$5.79 per pound or for Lamb Mignon at \$12.49 per pound? Processing costs depend on the complexity of the order, i.e. Shanks are cheap to cut and wrap, Mignon is expensive to make.

Retail carcass value seems to plummet exponentially when HHCW drops below 40 - 45 pounds and the processing costs are about the same. It costs a fixed \$24 to convert a live lamb of any weight into a HHC and incinerate the offal.

As a guide for profit from a FM venture of your own, you must calculate individual cut prices per pound so as to yield a minimum of \$300 in gross retail sales per lamb. I don't have any handy guidelines for carcass yield percentage of each of the various cuts.

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| 1. Rack of Lamb. | \$15.99/lb. |
| 2. Lamb Mignon. | \$12.49/lb. |
| 3. Leg of Lamb. | \$8.79/lb. (Bone in, sirloin attached with shank end trimmed to about 4 lbs.). |
| 4. Spicy Lamb Link Sausage. | \$7.99/lb. (Italian seasonings with Romano cheese, etc.). |
| 5. Mild Lamb Link Sausage. | \$7.99/lb. (Sun dried tomato and garlic seasonings, etc.). |
| 6. Lamburger Patties. | \$6.99/lb. |
| 7. Ground Lamb. | \$5.79/lb. |
| 8. Lamb Shanks. | \$5.99/lb. |
| 9. Crown Shoulder Roast. | \$8.99/lb. |
| 10. Lamb Kidneys. | \$5.99/lb. One man has a standing order for all I can produce. |
| 11. Lamb Hearts. | \$4.19/lb. The same man has a standing order for all I can produce. |
| Lamb Liver. | \$0.00/lb. I give it away to the occasional customer who asks about it. |

VALUE ADDED BY PROCESSING >> On June 25, 2007, I took ten yearling rams for processing into individual frozen packages. The quantity ordered for each cut listed below reflected replacement inventory needs. As mentioned earlier, retail carcass value varies somewhat depending on the cuts needed. Are we grinding lamb for Ground Lamb at \$5.79/lb or for Lamb Mignon at \$12.49/lb?

Live animal weights were unavailable. The hot hanging carcass weights (HHCW) averaged 58.8 pounds. The total processor cost for all materials, labor, offal incineration, supplies and taxes was \$574.83. Adding \$20 to this price for the 3.25 inch fibrous Mignon casings and two kinds of Sausage seasonings which I buy in bulk and furnish as required ups the processing cost to \$59.48 each or \$1.01 per pound of HHCW.

The total retail value of the packaged meat was \$3,611.85 or \$361.19 per yearling or \$6.14 per pound of HHCW.

The value added per lamb by processing is the total retail package value minus the on-farm value of the lamb (\$125.00*) minus the processing costs:

$$\text{\$361.19} - \text{\$125.00*} - \text{\$59.48} = \text{\$176.71 per lamb.}$$

*Note: I could never regularly and reliably sell ten lambs at a time on the farm for \$125 each.

The total dollar values of each cut were:

Leg of Lamb > \$335.51 Lamb Shanks > \$209.61 Lamb Mignon > \$642.63 Rack of Lamb > \$690.54
 Lamb Shoulder Crown Roast > \$548.58 Spicy Lamb Sausage > \$364.88 Mild Lamb Sausage > \$205.32
 Lamburger Patties > \$241.36 Ground Lamb > \$341.61 Lamb Hearts > \$18.27 Lamb Kidneys > \$13.54

Preparation / Planting / Grazing of Ryegrass

I wrote this many years ago, but it's still worth reading.

Introduction >> Over the years enough people have asked me about my ryegrass (RG) production and grazing procedures that I have decided to prepare this paper detailing the only methods that I consider to be worthwhile. Actually it is about more than just RG. It is about the year-round maintenance and production of sheep and cattle without relying on any stored or purchased feedstuffs (hay and/or grain).

Very Well Prepared Seedbed >> Start plowing and disking in early September. Plow six inches deep, then disk until 95 percent of the vegetation is dead and buried.

Plant about September 10-15. Broadcast 300 pounds per acre (PPA) of 6-24-24 and 50 PPA of RG seed. Seed variety should be tested and approved for your area. I use Jackson from Wax Seed Company. Check price and availability. Clover will not survive in this high rate of RG seeding.

Cultipack immediately and hope for rain. Watch for army worms.

When the RG is 2-4 inches tall, broadcast 200 PPA of urea or 300 PPA of ammonium nitrate (check their relative prices) and hope for rain. Continue daily worm watch until cool weather.

Depending on your spring grazing needs, plan to add up to 200 PPA of urea (300 PPA ammonium nitrate) in late February when the weather is warmer.

Grazing >> If it rains soon after seeding and again after the first nitrogen application, the RG will be 10-12 inches tall and ready for grazing by about November 1, and for nearly seven months thereafter.

Assuming the cattle are in good condition at the start of the RG season and internal parasites are under control, two hours per day of lush RG grazing will meet the nutritional needs of most animals. The exception is cows with nursing calves, and young stock where extra growth is desired. These groups require two hours each night and morning. Grazing time must be limited to two hours in order to minimize unnecessary trampling.

Too many people claim they can't use timed grazing because of their regular job. The truth is that all that is required is to have a family member or neighbor open the gate two hours before they get home.

Controlled grazing with portable electric polywire fencing must be used to conserve grass by minimizing trampling. This is done by allowing the cattle to have access only to a very small acreage during each graze to prevent them from wandering aimlessly about and ruining forage. The cattle should be allowed into a temporarily fenced portion of the RG pasture that contains no more grass than they can consume in a two-hour period. Estimation of the proper plot size takes some practice. However, the required size is probably much smaller than your first guess. When this area is completely grazed, remove the cows, relocate the electric fence to prohibit continued access during the regrowth period, and offer them a fresh plot the next day.

Unpreventable trampling during the daily two-hour graze is a problem during wet weather, but the RG planting rate of 50 PPA moderates the damage satisfactorily. I graze every animal every day regardless of the weather or soil conditions.

I do wait until the sun has thawed the frozen RG before I graze after a frost or freeze. However, this "rule" must be suspended on days when the temperature remains below freezing.

Finally, in early March when it is obvious that spring is arriving and RG growth is exceeding consumption, turn cow/calf pairs out to graze 24 hours per day. By mid to late March there should be sufficient growth for all animals except pregnant cows to graze 24 hours per day.

Perhaps a word about calving difficulties with cows wintered on lush RG would be appropriate. This has never been a problem for me because I limit pregnant cows to two hours per day of RG grazing and nothing else except minerals and salt. I also try to use common sense in initial breeding age/weight and in sire selection. No one should have more than an occasional problem if they follow similar guidelines.

Drill Planting >> RG may also be cross drilled (opposite directions) at about 30-35 PPA of seed whenever (September - December) the last grazing of the warm-season grasses is complete (graze closely). Obviously the earlier the planting the better. Do not plant the Gulf variety after about October 20, or any variety after about December 20. Clover seeding is a recommended addition to this planting method. Do not fertilize until a heavy frost or freeze has made the warm-season grasses dormant. Apply a complete fertilizer at this time. I use 350+ PPA of 25-15-15.

Topdress with 100-200 PPA of urea (or equivalent ammonium nitrate) in late February. The actual amount required is a guess based on the amount of clover in the stand and upon your anticipated forage needs for the rest of the RG season. Consider one pound per acre of actual nitrogen per day of expected RG grazing.

The time of first grazing and the total forage production of this method can not be predicted. In general this procedure seems to produce no more than about half as much forage as the well-prepared seedbed method does even though the expenditures for seed and fertilizer can be nearly as high. However, since a person can not plow every acre he owns in early September, this planting method is a very useful one.

Use timed and controlled grazing as previously described.

Make sure that all of the RG is removed (grazed/baled) before early May so that the warm-season grasses will not be stunted too badly.

Cost Factors >> If you calculate the total per acre costs of the two planting methods described above, you may feel faint. However, if you could honestly and accurately calculate the cost of wintering cows on hay (taking into account its normally dubious quality and all production costs including machinery), you might feel deathly ill. RG may be expensive, but at least the quality is excellent which is something that can not be said of the typical Gulf Coast hay bale, which is all-too-often round and stored outside. I am certain that hay is one of the most expensive things that you can feed a cow. Animal-harvested RG means minimal investment in machinery and labor!

Despite what some inexperienced grazers may suggest, absolutely no hay or feed is required to winter cows if two hours per day of lush RG grazing is available (two hours twice per day for lactating cows and young stock). As of the late spring of 1995 I have had eight winters of no hay produced, purchased, or fed; and only in the late fall of 1993 was I required to purchase any feed. This was necessitated by the combination of late RG (prolonged drought) and dead warm-season grasses (killing frost/freeze on November 1). After a few days the cows refused to eat the dead grass. The solution was to purchase 500 pound syrup blocks (very expensive) which encouraged the cows to continue to eat the dead grass until the RG was ready. The cost was 40 cents per day per cow or about \$900 until the RG was ready. This \$900 represents my total eight year feed purchases for wintering cows. About the only other time I purchase feed is for 8 to 10 days to give to freshly weaned calves and when preparing herd bull prospects to go on performance test.

Highly Recommended Sheep and Goat Website

⇒ Maryland Small Ruminant Page <http://www.sheepandgoat.com/> ⇐

Closed Flock

We closed our flock in 2005. First, let's define "closed" to mean that all our breeding males are now produced from within the flock with no outside rams purchased, borrowed, or used. The female side was closed over three years ago when we enrolled in the Scrapie Program.

The professional word on sire-side closure generally seems to be: 1. Don't do it. or, 2. Only do it if the flock contains a minimum of 300 - 400 females and you are absolutely certain that they are truly superior in all traits of economic importance.

We do have the required number of females, but they would be regarded as of fairly mediocre quality by many "experts." Does that mean we were only half qualified for closure?

No, and the reason is that our flock is superior to others in the one economic trait that is most important. That trait is survivability at hot, humid, parasite-infested Boggs Farms where the feed trough is always empty; and injections, inoculations, hormones, and antibiotics are never given.

Over the years our sheep have been slowly developed into a minimal maintenance flock by benign neglect and survival of the fittest. The weak are allowed to die and the strong are expected to fend for themselves. They live and prosper on our farm which is apparently a rare and unique quality as evidenced by the 50% death loss (within six months of arrival) that we've experienced over the years with rams purchased from seed stock producers where the feed trough is always full - and for reasons unknown to us - injections are routinely and regularly given. It's hard to make "progress" with dead rams.

In February of 2005 we sorted and tagged the 12 best November '04 ram lambs and saved them for use with our four surviving rams for breeding starting on June 9, 2005. We will use the old purchased rams for as long as they live, but plan to continue selecting breeding rams from within our own flock.

Another factor which made this flock closing decision easy is that it is a low risk undertaking. Nothing is going to happen to our existing females; and if at some point the offspring from this experiment appear unsatisfactory, they can be sold and the project terminated by the purchase of new outside rams - although they will undoubtedly be sadly unprepared for "real life."

We'll keep you posted.

Philosophical and Operational Change December 2005

Boggs Farms is currently undergoing an essential philosophical and operational "menu" adjustment in order to persevere economically. The option is to stay the course and risk slowly dwindling away. We refer to our long standing commitment of meeting all our livestock's total year-round dietary needs using just fresh growing green forages as the *carte du jour*. While nutritionists praise the virtues of exclusive fresh grass grazing for those meat animals intended for human consumption -- it is not the norm and has become increasingly infeasible on our farm.

Bountiful green grass in January is a wonderful, but rather unnatural (and expensive) concept. As the cost of energy and energy related products like fuels and fertilizers continue to skyrocket, it has become increasingly unaffordable. Recent "climate change" is a temporary (?) factor as well.

For nearly 20 years, fresh growing winter forages (without hay or grain) has been the backbone of our winter livestock feeding program and has served our farm to perfection. The merits of growing cool season forages is

enumerated in three sections listed on our Webpage. However, times are changing. In the last three years energy prices have doubled and previously unfathomable prolonged days of torrid heat and drought has decimated our annual plantings of cool season forages. Until moderation returns to energy prices (unlikely) and also to autumn weather patterns (unknown), we have to make adjustments to remain viable.

This means reducing our dependence on the superb, but energy-intensive weather-sensitive winter forage crops and to depend more on our warm season grass hay, and possibly some purchased feedstuffs as required to supplement the protein and/or energy content of the hay. The hay we produced in the summer of '05 was satisfactory in energy, but slightly deficient in the protein required by young lambs and lactating ewes. In compensation, we are offering carefully controlled amounts of cotton seed meal (CSM) to balance their nutritional requirements. CSM is a high protein animal feed byproduct of the Louisiana cotton industry.

Whether or not this dietary change will significantly affect the desirable Omega-3 and Conjugated Linoleic Acid content of our lamb meat is beyond our ability to foresee; but we do continue to guarantee that our products are always "wholesome, delicious, and nutritious!"

Thank you for your time, consideration, and continued patronage.

Epilogue to the Above Philosophical and Operational Change Plan

The CSM experiment was a failure in that not all of the animals would eat it, and therefore did not get enough protein in their diet and fared poorly. It was also rather expensive as purchased in 50 lb. bags already premixed with salt in a CSM/salt ratio of 3/1. After the winter of 2005/2006 I abandoned the CSM idea.

In the late spring of 2006 and then again in the autumn of 2006 I tried rice bran as a supplement. I had it dumped in unprotected, free-choice 25 ton piles in the pasture. After a brief acclimation period, the sheep started eating it very well with no apparent problems of overeating. The more it "soured and spoiled," the better they liked it (perhaps a bit of fermentation to alcohol was taking place?).

All appeared well until the November/December 2006 lambs were a few weeks old and began to consume the rice bran in "significant" quantity. The lambs started dying at an alarming rate. Although a detailed analysis of the situation was not made, a veterinarian's opinion was that rice bran's calcium/phosphorus ration or calcium/potassium ration (I forget which) was fatal to young lambs.

Having no way to block the lambs from the bran piles without also depriving the ewes of a vital feed supplement, I had to wean the young lambs -- which was not a good thing either.

As a result of the above annoyance / exasperation, plus an attractive whole flock buyout offer from a Missouri cattleman, plus early complications from Parkinson's Disease -- we (Frank & Lynne) retired from livestock production and retail marketing in late 2007 -- although my parents (Frank & Joy, ages 93 and 91) still have a small herd of beef cattle.

~ THE END ~

⇒ Never Over Cook Lamb -- Always Serve It Hot ⇐

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