

Livestock Links

A Statewide Newsletter for Alabamians

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Future Leader in the Goat Industry

Robert Spencer, Extension Area Specialist

According to the most recent census of agriculture conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, goat farming is becoming increasingly popular. The Ag Census also reveals increasing numbers of women are taking an active role in agriculture production. Vicky Flack fits both of these situations; she raises Boer goats in North Alabama. Based on her extensive background in agriculture and her enthusiasm, she could become a leader in the goat industry within Alabama.

Vicky is the proud operator of Poor-Ridge Farm, a 40-acre operation located outside of Falkville about 30 miles south of Huntsville, Ala. With the guidance of her father, Ronald Flack, and the assistance of her young niece, Ashley Toller, Vicky currently manages a respectable goat farm with more than 200 goats. She takes care of all the day-to-day tasks without additional assistance. Vicky gives her father credit for being an inspiration and encouragement at all times. And, she gives her niece credit for providing unique insight and levity as they work together with the daily chores.

Vicky and her father have an extensive background in various agriculture enterprises; both generations have worked the same farm site which exists today. Vicky says the farm began as a dairy cow operation. Her father later switched to swine production and began raising feeder pigs. In the 1970s, he realized poultry was an up-and-coming opportunity so he switched to raising layer hens. Vicky says with time she began to take a more active role in the farming operation, and her father encouraged her to assume more management responsibilities. After 31 years of being active in the poultry industry, Vicky and her father realized it was time to switch again. Vicky chose goats over cattle because she considered the smaller animals more manageable. Vicky and Ashley

now do most of the chores, and Ronald shares his expertise based on years of experience.

An advantage Poor-Ridge Farm has over most goat production systems is its three high-quality barns. The facilities are relatively new and are used to shelter the goats during inclement weather and kidding season. The buildings are insulated and have screen windows and huge exhaust fans to pull in cool air. With time and effort, Vicky has modified these chicken houses with pens that keep the goats separated based upon their age. She has also built individual kidding stalls and a work station with corrals to move the animals. Vicky maintains the building and floor in sanitary conditions at all times. All this has been developed and maintained through her sole initiative.

In 2002, Vicky bought her first goats, nothing fancy, just goats. In the following 2 years, she acquired 50 registered (percentage and full-blood) does and a few bucks then integrated them into her herd. In recent years, she has tried to maintain a closed herd and produce her own breeding stock. She currently has more than 100 breeding does, more than 100 kids and several herd sires, all of which provide an excellent genetic pool of quality animals. At this point, she has sold few does as she is trying to build her herd. Her market has been primarily young, intact billies as meat goats. Vicky's strategy for production and marketing is evolving as her operation grows.

Vicky's original attraction with goats was their visual appeal and their size, which made them easier to handle than cattle. Her original intent was to use them for their grazing/browsing ability and keep the 40 acres naturally groomed. Initially, Vicky did not realize goat farming required considerable involvement. As she researched meat goats and visited more goat farms, she developed a specific interest in the Boer goat. Although she originally started with unregistered stock, she soon realized the potential value for registered animals as brood stock so her subsequent purchases have always been registered Boer goats. With time, she soon discovered marketing opportunities for selling goats as meat animals rather than using them solely for vegetation control. Since then, she has readily sold young male goats as meat animals and retained all desirable does for expanding her brood stock inventory.

When asked about initial obstacles faced as she began raising goats, her response addressed the following areas: (1) Limited availability of effective healthcare products (medicines and dewormers) specifically labeled for goats; (2) readily available marketing opportunities that offset production costs; and (3) limited information regarding the challenges associated with goat production. Over time, she has seen an improvement in

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Chicken house turned goat barn.

Goat Production and Profitability

Robert Spencer, Extension Area Specialist

The meat goat industry continues to grow while debate exists regarding profitability. Producers and enterprise budgets confirm the controversy. Farmers have limited ability to influence market prices and fixed production costs. They do have ability to manage variable production costs; which are the “out-of-pocket” expenses associated with daily operations. These tend to include supplemental feed (hay and grain feed), medical (medicines and veterinarian costs), pasture management (fertilizer and lime), and maintenance (repairs) and labor.

Utilization of available pastures and effective pasture management (including rotational grazing) minimizes need for hay and feed. A farmer should first utilize grazing areas then consider purchasing supplemental hay from other farmers. It is more cost effective to purchase needed hay than to own haying equipment. Abundant pastures minimize the need for supplemental feed grains. While there will be times when supplemental feeding is necessary, efficient pasture utilization and management decreases reliance on supplemental feed.

Goat production and medical costs go hand-in-hand; it is imperative producers learn as much as possible about goat health care. They must develop a working relationship with a veterinarian and other goat producers and learn as much as possible. A vet can provide professional advice, treatments, and prescribe and sell necessary medicines. Other goat producers will share their experiences, help each other in times of need and recommend less costly sources for healthcare supplies. Goats may require medical treatment, but with education and time a producer can become self-sufficient and minimize healthcare expenditures.

Parasite control is a serious expense. An overload of gastrointestinal worms, coccidia or external parasites can seriously compromise a goat's health. Farmers must learn how to (1) conduct fecal-egg exams to verify possible internal parasite problems; (2) use the FAMACHA System (ocular and oral membrane color determines or denies need for parasite treatment) for indicating need to deworm; and (3) use medicines that are labeled specifically for goats and request the services of a veterinarian for off-label dewormers when necessary. The ability for a farmer to manage parasite problems minimizes the need for unnecessary expenditures.

Effective and efficient pasture management serves a dual role. Rotational grazing and removing animals from pastures with short forages effectively minimizes potential problems with internal parasites. Studies have shown parasites generally do not climb up forages any higher than 6 inches high to lay eggs. If goats are allowed to graze on short forages, they are more likely to ingest parasites and parasite eggs. Taller forages will minimize the likelihood of ingesting parasites and parasite eggs, and minimize the need for frequent deworming.

Pastures with well-balanced nutrient availability are important. Appropriate fertilizer and lime application ensuring correct soil conditions play an important role in forage production, availability and nutrition. Excessive nutrient applications are a waste of effort and money. Soil testing will reveal exactly which nutrients may be needed. Application of poultry litter and other livestock manure as fertilizer is an option. When it comes to forages healthy pastures provide nutrition and health benefits.

When it comes to maintenance and labor costs associated with goat production, the best advice is the farmer should do as much as possible. Hiring outside contractors or labor increases variable costs. While equipment and machinery repairs may require

the goat industry. The industry is expanding as more people become active in goat production. She interacts with other goat producers to learn new ideas that address challenges associated with goat production. Other producers readily share their thoughts about improving production efficiencies. She also credits several magazines specific to small ruminant production, which provided additional insight. Much of what she has learned about effective and less costly forms of healthcare are the result of her own initiative and persistence.

Vicky has adopted effective and efficient management practices. In the past she used a notebook for record-keeping, but she now uses a computer software program called “Ranch Manager.” She says it initially requires more time to enter the data, but the results are worth it. She uses rotational grazing for pasture management. While this practice requires additional fencing, the ability to provide quality forages is worth the initial cost and labor. Feed and hay are two of her primary expenses. She feeds a mixture of soybean hull pellets and cracked corn as grain feed; hay, which is available most of the time, and loose mineral (specific for goats) which is available all the time. Vicky selectively deworms every 21 days for parasite control. She examines the inner eye and gum membrane of each animal before deworming them. If the membranes are pink, the goat is not dewormed; if they are pale, the goat receives an appropriate dose of dewormer. Vicky says these practices have minimized cost inefficiencies and enhanced profit margins.

Vicky uses direct marketing techniques because “it puts the dollars straight in the pocket of the producer.” She acknowledges livestock sales facilities serve their purpose when a farmer needs to move goats quickly and in quantities. But too often good goats are mixed in with undesirable goats affecting the price for a prime animal. As Vicky's operation has expanded, she has learned about the Hispanic market's preference for purchasing live goats. She also networks with other goat producers who may be unable to meet the local demand, which allows them to pool their goats and continue meeting demand. She says this ensures repeat business from satisfied customers and benefits everyone involved.

Vicky identifies the following as current challenges in the goat industry: ongoing problems with parasites and the limited ability to control them; costs associated with dewormers and other medicines; and the increasing costs of supplemental feed. Vicky says the drought of 2006 and other relevant issues had a significant impact on costs of supplemental feeding. Despite attempts to manage pastures, the drought led to limited forages. Limited hay availability and rising prices are also having an economic impact. And interest in ethanol production has driven up the cost of corn. These problems have a significant effect on potential profitability.

Vicky has plans and goals for the future. She wants an operation with 150 to 200 quality breeding nannies and high-quality bucks that will continue to improve the overall features of their offspring. She plans to stick with traditional colored Boers (white body, red/brown head) despite the current popularity of paint and red Boers. She will always have meat goats for sale (effective culling) but intends to begin selling quality breeding stock. This year she plans to begin showing some of her registered goats in sanctioned shows. “Meat goats are fine for a supplemental income, but breed stock and show-quality animals bring a more substantial price,” she says. Her philosophy is “always look for opportunities to improve.” With that attitude, Vicky Flack has the potential to become a leader in the Alabama goat industry.

Her farm Web site is www.poorridgefarm.com.

professional services, self-sufficiency is the practical way to minimize labor and maintenance costs.

Meat goat production has significant opportunities for improvement. Budget planning and evaluation serves as a valuable farm management tool. Monitoring, evaluating and implementing more efficient production practices should effectively control variable costs and increase the likelihood of profitability.

Alabama's Dairy Goat Industry Fad, Fashion or Fixture

Boyd Brady, Extension Associate-Dairy

The key phrase in production agriculture today is "niche market." Is Alabama's dairy goat industry a niche market that is a fad, fashion or a fixture of time?

In 1989, when I moved to Auburn and started work with Extension there have always been two pockets (three producers in each pocket) of dairy goat producers who were a part of the Alabama Dairy Herd Improvement Association's testing program. They wanted records to go with show results to help market their goats. Today we have 12 producers on this program and records are now being used to evaluate animals for production and health. In 2000, the nation's top dairy goat for fat production was from Robertsedale, Ala.

Since January 2005, there has been a growing interest in the dairy goat industry in Alabama. Calls to Extension personnel have increased from about one per month to as many as 10 per week. In January 2005, there was only one grade A producer in the state, at the present there are six grade A producers in Alabama. (You must have a grade A permit to sell milk or milk products for human consumption.) We presently have two herds milking more than 125 does; they have someone marketing their milk and cheese. Goat milk and cheese for pet consumption has increased drastically. At this point, the sale of raw milk for human consumption is not allowed. I will speak to an average of six to seven producers or people interested in dairy goat production.

Producers and other interested people are learning more about other products that can originate from goat milk, such as hand creams, lotions, shaving cream, soaps and lip balm. These products do not require a permit to produce and can be produced in a small area. Several producers around the Southeast have stated that during the last year and a half Internet sales for these products have more than tripled.

Dairy goat producers are, for the most part, part-time producers who got into the business by providing milk for their family (for health or personnel reasons), hobby farming or showing. As more people learn about the digestibility of goat milk, the more its demand has grown. Presently, we have three groups looking into the possibility of organizing a cooperative to start marketing milk and cheese. These cooperatives will include between three and 12 producers pooling their milk and selling it locally. This has spurred more interest of producers in these areas of the state.

On June 7, 2006, we held the first state-wide Dairy Goat Conference in Auburn, Ala. We had more than 70 people in attendance of these 35 considered themselves as producers for 30 different farms. We covered issues such as nutrition, parasite control, requirements for being a grade A dairy, records, and animal and premise identification.

Today I have a list of more than 75 names of farms that have and milk goats and I feel like this is only a fraction of the producers in

the state. It has been difficult to get a complete list because most of the small producers want to stay under the radar when it comes to being known as a producer, they are concerned about regulations. For the most part this concept is beginning to change, but several groups still have grave concerns.

In the past these producers have not had a good source to go to for information on health, reproductive, nutrition and management issues; therefore they feel like they have had to do for themselves and have done extremely well. They feel that they have no ties to any group because no one has stepped up to assist them. As we continue to work with this group, we can build a better working relationship and provide more assistance.

Only time will tell for sure if the dairy goat industry has a future or is just a fad or fashion in Alabama. One sure thing is they have a strong grassroots base and the demand of their product is growing. Also, with the decline of dairy cattle in the state, more people are looking for a product produced locally.

Alabama Meat Goat Producers Participate in a Regional On-Farm Meat Goat Performance Test Project with Tennessee and Kentucky

Maria L. Leite-Browning, Extension Animal Scientist, Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities

Dr. Maria L. Leite-Browning, Extension animal scientist, will assist in the implementation of a recently funded on-farm meat goat performance test project. Dr. Richard Browning Jr. of Tennessee State University in Nashville received funding from the USDA-National Research Initiative Small Farms Program in 2006 to start an on-farm testing scheme for meat goat herds in the Southeast. The American Meat Goat Association, Tennessee Goat Producers Association and the Goat and Sheep Producers of Alabama are affiliated with this effort. There are a couple of producers in Kentucky that will also be joining the outreach effort this summer.

The TSU Meat Goat On-Farm Performance Testing is an extension of the on-going meat goat genetic evaluation research in the Institute of Agricultural Research at TSU. The testing program is designed to stimulate record-keeping of economically important traits in meat goat herds so owners can make more informed selection/culling decisions to enhance overall doe herd productivity. These performance records will also help herd owners better understand the economics of their operations. Under this project, genetic evaluation procedures used in the TSU research herd over the last few years will be applied to participating commercial herds using standard TSU herd protocols for weight adjustments and ratio indexing. Meat goat producers in Alabama will be able to gain the benefits of working with the well-established and unique genetic evaluation research effort in Tennessee.

Producers in Tennessee, Alabama and Kentucky are already enrolled. Producers outside this region, such as Illinois, Maryland and Missouri, have also expressed interest and are welcome to inquire

about joining the program. Weaning weights will be collected and, when possible, birth weights. For farms without scales, arrangements will be made to make one available at the appropriate time. Along with weight data, the recording of other important animal traits will also be encouraged to assist animal evaluation and selection.

The project will run for 3 years. The goals are to have cooperator herds participate over all 3 years and to continue on-farm testing after the project is complete. Participation is open to any management scheme (seedstock or commercial) and to all breed types (purebred or crossbred). A project interest meeting is planned for May 26 at the TSU Meat Goat Research Station to describe and discuss the testing scheme with interested producers. In addition to a short formal project meeting, attendees will also be able to view the research herd. As part of the on-going breed evaluation project, the TSU research herd is comprised of straightbred breeding stock representing Boer, Kiko, and Spanish goats. For more information, contact Dr. Leite-Browning at (256) 372-4954 or MLL0002@auburn.edu.

Calendar of Events

July		
9 to 13	State 4-H Horse Show, Montgomery	
10	Delivery for 2007 North Alabama Bull Evaluation	
17	BCIA Board of Directors Meeting, Clanton, 10 a.m.	
19 to 20	State 4-H Animal Science Events, Auburn University	
31	Fall Nutrition Series via Videoconference, 7 to 9 p.m. Contact your local Extension personnel for details.	

August		
1	Nomination Deadline for the Southwest Alabama Heifer Sale	
14	Alabama Feeder Cattle Marketing Association Board Sale, Autaugaville, 7 p.m.	
15	Nomination Deadline for the Fall Round Up Bull and Heifer Sale	
17	Chilton County BCIA Open and Bred Heifer Sale, 7 p.m., Clanton. Contact Jack Tatum at (205) 316-8382.	
18	AU Block & Bridle Sheep & Goat Show, Auburn University	
21 to 22	Delivery for the 2007-08 Auburn University Bull Test	
25	Ag O Rama Heifer Sale, Upper Coastal Plain Research Center, Winfield, 11 a.m.	
28	Fall Nutrition Series via Videoconference, 7 to 9 p.m. Contact your local Extension personnel for details.	
31	Herdbuilder Female Sale, Uniontown, 11 a.m.	
September		
6	Southwest Alabama Heifer Sale, Frisco City, 7 p.m.	
10	Nomination Deadline for the 2007-08 Wiregrass Forage Based Bull Evaluation	
11	Regional Beef Cattle Meeting, Service Center in Carrollton, 7 to 9 p.m. Dr. Patsy Houghton from Heartland Cattle Company is featured speaker.	
25	Fall Nutrition Series via Videoconference, 7 to 9 pm. Contact your local Extension personnel for details.	

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