

Overview of the United States Meat Goat Industry

Introduction

Goats are one of the oldest domesticated livestock. There are numerous breeds of goats that are categorized by their capacity to produce fiber, milk, or meat. While those breeds specializing in fiber and milk production may also serve as meat goats, most meat goats are not ideal producers of fiber or milk.

Boer, Kiko, Myotonic (Tennessee Fainting Goat), Savannah, Spanish, or any of these breed combinations are ideal meat producers. While various forms of goat production have existed throughout the world for centuries, in 1992, the United States (US) developed a strong interest in meat goat production. Since then, the meat goat industry has been the fastest growing segment of livestock production in America. Initial interest in meat goat production primarily took place in the Southeast, with Texas and Tennessee leading most states and having the largest goat populations. In more recent years, interest in meat goat production has expanded across the country from California to Maine.

Meat Goat Industry Trends

Since the early 1990s, importation of goat meat and domestic meat goat production has continued to increase. Much of this is attributed to increasing demand created by populations immigrating to the United States. Persons from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean, who have relocated to the United States, are accustomed to eating goat meat. These persons continue to have a preference for goat meat during religious holidays, on special occasions, and during extended holidays when families and friends gather together. In 2003, the US Census Bureau reported 33.5 million foreign-born US citizens. This population trend that accounts for domestic goat meat consumption is expected to last for years to come and is considered to



be the driving force behind the increasing interest in meat goat production throughout the United States.

Information from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) shows that Australia is the primary exporter of goat meat into the United States. In 2008, the USDA's National Agriculture Statistics Service reported 3,150,000 meat goats in the United States, yet American producers are unable to meet domestic demand. Prior to the early 1990s, there were no organized efforts to promote meat goats and their production. The formation of several producer organizations took place as interest and the potential for meat goat production began to develop. On a national basis, they include, but are not limited to, the American Boer Goat Association, the American Meat Goat Association, the International Boer Goat Association, and the US Boer Goat Association. Such groups recognize the interest and potential for meat goat production and continue to support the industry as well as educational and outreach efforts designed to benefit potential and novice producers. These same organizations have also been instrumental in promoting goat demonstrations for all ages to highlight quality animals and desirable breed traits and characteristics.

Another interesting factor facilitating the expansion in the meat goat industry within the Southeast is financial settlements resulting from class action lawsuits against the US tobacco industry. As monies were designated to pursue alternative forms of agriculture production within respective states, many of those switching from tobacco production began to pursue meat goat production as a viable alternative. While this venture has been restricted to states relying on tobacco production, such as Kentucky, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee, the economic benefits trickled out to many of the adjoining states, with producers offering quality brood stock for sale.

Goat production offers a viable form of sustainable livestock production, particularly for individuals with limited financial resources, limited land availability, and limited physical abilities. While the young and old tend to be easily intimidated by large animal production such as beef or dairy cattle and hogs, goats are not as intimidating because of their smaller body size and general demeanor. Goats also serve as an environmentally friendly form of vegetative control and can easily be integrated as an alternative form of livestock diversification. They do not compete for the same type vegetation as cattle, sheep, or swine, and tend to complement other forms of livestock production.

Market Growth Challenges

As the meat goat industry in the United States continues to grow, it is easier to find information on meat goats and meat goat production. However, finding data that solely addresses meat goats can be difficult unless one knows how to research specific agencies within the USDA. For example, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collects data through regular surveys, including a census every 5 years. NASS offers both inventory and slaughter data. The Agriculture Marketing Services (AMS) offers market data that includes the ability to provide historical data. The FAS offers information on international trade and goats. More and more state Extension services and their respective universities offer an abundant collection of information on meat goat and dairy goat production.

Land grant universities in particular have taken the lead in providing educational information and programs. The Alabama Cooperative

Extension System offers a broad spectrum of information online (www.aces.edu), and Florida A&M University, Fort Valley State University, Langston State University, and Penn State University are among many institutions that offer extensive information and programs addressing various aspects of goat production.

Meat goat production is an alternative form of livestock production for novice producers seeking learning opportunities to expand their knowledge base. While producers tend to focus on marketing and health care as their primary areas of concern, they benefit significantly by diversifying their knowledge base into other aspects of meat goat production. Primary areas requiring continuing education include breed options for meat goat production, reproduction management, feeding and nutrition, health concerns and management, pasture management, fencing and facilities, marketing strategies and options, and familiarity with live animal evaluation. Educational and outreach programs using a comprehensive approach to address all aspects of meat goat production tend to best serve novice meat goat producers. Producers in general benefit from attending educational workshops, reading industry relevant publications, and interacting with "seasoned" producers. Informed producers are less likely to repeat the same mistakes and more likely to be satisfied with their management decisions. With the adaptation of proper management strategies and implementation of beneficial practices, meat goat production has potential as a sustainable form of livestock production.

While the meat goat industry offers much promise, factors that compromise potential expansion and production are:

- Inconsistent supply to satisfy peak season demand, generally during religious holidays.
- Lack of producer knowledge and strategic planning to arrange for reproduction based upon anticipation of these peak demand opportunities. Many producers are unfamiliar with religious holidays associated with persons from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean.
- Non-standardization of production practices. The industry is still in its developmental stages, and organizations and educators have insufficiently developed cohesive and standardized best management practices.

- Predation and parasitism are two factors negatively affecting herd health, in some cases resulting in mortality and production and profitability losses.
- Limited information regarding quality assurance practices.
- Failure to establish food quality and safety guidelines and the standardization of processing and cuts.
- Limited number of USDA-inspected facilities across the country.

These factors can be addressed through collaboration among producer groups and organizations, state and federal regulatory agencies, and those with political interests who are able to "make things happen." Partnerships will ensure standardized practices and procedures and the establishment of processing facilities that ensure industry success.

While the AMS reports on prices paid for meat goats at livestock sale barns across the United States, and while goat meat prices have historically continued to increase, they have not increased in proportion to the ever-increasing demand or cost of production. Increases in prices paid for meat goats do not respond to the increasing costs of fuel used for production equipment and transportation, and to the costs of feeding. One way for producers and producer groups to address this issue is to consider forming cooperatives that provide greater bargaining power when it comes to commanding higher prices, and to take a look at value-added production and processing.

Future Trends

The future of the meat goat industry cannot continue to rely on demand from US citizens originally from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. Price and availability of goat meat, as well as competition from more commonly found commercial meats at grocery stores influence the demand for goat meat. Also, the next generation of immigrants will more likely become more "Americanized" than their parents or grandparents and seek out traditional American meats such as beef, chicken, and pork.

Traditional Americans are unaware of the health aspects associated with goat meat and might be more receptive to alternative forms of meat if they were more knowledgeable of the health aspects. So far, goat meat promoters of the US meat goat industry have failed to address this

aspect. Therefore, it is inevitable that those with an interest in the success of the meat goat industry think toward the future and consider potential opportunities to promote the health aspects of goat meat. Not only is it a viable alternative to traditional meats, but it has health benefits that surpass beef, pork, poultry, and seafood. Goat meat also has culinary appeal due to its versatility and ability to be prepared in various forms, recipes, and during special occasions, while providing stimulating conversations during food-related gatherings.

The good news is that the meat goat industry will continue to grow for years to come. Projections from the US Census Bureau confirm the continued growth of populations from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean in the United States. These populations will continue to be the driving force for demand for goat meat and growth in the meat goat industry. NASS forecasts a continued increase in demand for goat meat and a consecutive growth in meat goat production within the United States. With this positive outlook, the challenge to meet the demand will ensure potential opportunities for those interested in meat goat production. These opportunities will necessitate those institutions, organizations, and leaders active within the meat goat industry to continue to hold a vested interest to ensure promotion and producer education as outreach efforts are continued and expanded as needs arise.

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