

Things aren't as bad as they seem

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Despite the growing number of meat goats and meat goat producers in the United States, there is a growing perception that the industry is in trouble.

This notion is being fueled on several Internet chat groups where all a person reads about is all the problems that producers are having with sick and dying goats.

One person commenting on a popular chat group went so far as to proclaim: "It is my overwhelming impression that these animals require far too much care to be practical as farm animals!"

Unfortunately, many people are getting this same impression. The fact is, there are lots of successful goat operations in all parts of the country. Trouble is, all you hear about are the people having so many problems. The successful producers tend to mind their business, raise their goats and typically remain anonymous.

I have visited goat farms from Texas to Pennsylvania to Louisiana and Florida and people are successfully raising goats in all of these areas.

To gauge the growing number of goats in an area, all one has to do is look at the local markets. Monthly goat sales have popped up all over the Southeast.

Our local goat sale at Y&R Livestock in Ripley, Miss., has 800 to 1,000 head every month. Thompson Station, Tenn., and Bowling Green, Ky., have over a 1,000 head a month. That's not big numbers compared to San Angelo, Texas, but there are dozens of small sales that have several hundred head each month.

Kentucky alone has five graded goat sales a month. There must be a lot of folks successfully raising goats somewhere in the Eastern hills and bayous to keep these sale barns supplied with goats month after month and year after year.

The interesting thing is that even with all these new producers and new channels for marketing goats, we still can't meet the demand and have to import hundreds of tons of goat meat each year.

At our ranch here in northwest Mississippi, we're running 175 momma does and 100 replacement nannies, along with 100 newborns (more on the way) and a herd of 20 bucks. At the moment we're doing OK. No limpers and no one has died from worms in recent memory.

Our herd is about one third Kiko purebreds, a third Kiko percentages and a third Boer percentages. We use Kiko bucks on all of these does.

It took us a few hard lessons to get to this point, but the reality is that you can raise goats on the East Coast, the Gulf Coast and in-between and do it successfully. The key is to know what you are doing, know what kind of goats you are buying and know what your goals are. Ignorance dooms more goat farms than pneumonia or parasites.

Persons considering getting into the meat goat business are encouraged to find and talk to successful producers. That's the best way to make sure you get on the right track.

Feed prices keep rising

Over the years we've learned how to keep our goats alive. The problem now is figuring out how to afford to feed them through the winter.

One thing we've learned this year is that we need more cool-season grasses. We need a fall-back position against high grain and hay prices. That's our project for the coming months.

For now, we still have a few more weeks before sufficient grass will be available for grazing by my lactating does.

In my November 2007 column I outlined my feeding plans and budget for the winter. I had based my calculations on my main feed, cotton seed meal, holding at \$6.10 for a 50-pound bag - which, at the time, I thought was ridiculous because it cost me \$5 last year.

In my closing paragraphs I noted that my plans were open to a lot of variables. Good thing I had that disclaimer! That high-priced cotton seed meal jumped to \$7.25 a bag in January then to \$8.75 in February. That's a 42% increase in price in three months! It was time to re-evaluate my feeding strategy.

Naturally I went to Dr. Frank Pinkerton for advice ... after some calculating, Frank decided that for a nickel a head more per day, I could use a textured 16% goat feed that I have mixed locally instead of the cottonseed meal.

I have decided to go that route because the goat feed has nearly three times as much total digestible nutrients (TDN) as the cottonseed meal. In addition, all the month-old kids are starting stick their heads in the feed trough with their moms. This feed should give them a good head start.

They'll need it, because by the time you read my April column, the clover and ryegrass will be knee deep and all the goats will be sent out to pasture. Of course these plans, too, can change as quickly as our weather. Wish me luck!