You and Your Elk:

A Demonstration of Alternative, Diversified Farming

Elk are easy keepers: They need about a third of the forage of a dairy animal and bring high prices for their velvet antlers and their venison.

Les and Deb Armstrong of Cornwallville, New York run a farm that has been in the family since 1863. In that time it has been a poultry and apple operation, a dairy farm, and, more recently, a working beef and sheep farm. Then, in 1996, the Armstrongs added registered American elk to the mixture, thinking the animals would be good for the pastures and offer some extra farm income.

"It's been a good fit for us, and very good for our profitability," says Les Armstrong, who landed a 1998 SARE grant to improve his operation. "Raising elk is something small farmers, particularly livestock farmers, can do to diversify. You can rotate elk with dairy and beef animals, and there is a good market for the velvet antlers, which are sold as a medicinal." These velvet antlers are used widely, especially in Asia, where they are said to accelerate bone healing, relieve arthritis, and control blood pressure.

To brighten the picture even more, elk are easy keepers—an elk eats about a third of the forage needed by beef and dairy animals—and they bring high prices for their venison. "We also found that elk farming eliminated unnecessary weeds from the pastures," says Armstrong. "The small pellet manure was much more evenly dispersed on the land, and there was a direct reduction in non-point-source pollution from manure runoff during the winter months."

Handling the elk presents certain challenges—they are fence friendly, but their size and relative lack of domestication means they must be kept calm. Tranquilizer use is minimized to keep the velvet antlers free from impurities,

so padding and shadecloth are used where needed; squeezes, handling pens, fences, and gates all require special construction. But no matter how the Armstrongs look at it, it's been worth it: "Velvet antlers are a renewable resource that brings a good price, and, once you make the initial investment, these animals are cheaper to raise, on a day-to-day basis, than beef or dairy cows. They are also good for the land, and good for the balance sheet."

Perhaps one indicator of the profitability of elk farming is the increasing number of elk boarding at the Armstrong farm—five are on site and three more are scheduled to arrive soon. Added to Armstrong's herd, this brings the current census to twenty-two. And with the elk come the people: The Armstrongs have successfully hosted two conferences, with attendees coming from as far away as Colorado, and local schools and colleges have incorporated the Armstrong elk farm into their curricula. The farm also offers tours to other farmers and the general public.

"Right now," Armstrong said in a recent telephone interview, "we want to work on improving the genetics of the herd, and we would also like to install a scale for accurate weighing. Cow and calf sales look promising for us over the next few years, since a well-bred animal fetches good money."

The most important thing, though, is that this improved profitability means that the Armstrong farm is more likely to pass to the next generation. "Elk farming keeps open land in production," said Armstrong, "and shows that alternative methods of farming can make family operations viable.

"They are magnificent animals," he said. "It's a good way of life."

The Armstrongs welcome inquiries about their elk operation, and invite anyone with an interest to visit the farm. Call 518/622-8452 to schedule a visit. For more about their grant project with Northeast SARE, call us at 802/656-0471 and request FNE98-212.

Chronic Wasting Disease in elk is an emerging problem; contact your state veterinanrian before initiating an elk farming operation.

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