

Grazing Goats Topic of Pasture Meeting

by Sherry Russell

LEICESTER, VT - Hannah Sessions and Greg Bernhardt hosted a group on June 25 for a pasture walk at their Leicester, VT farm where they milk goats, and sell it to Vermont Butter & Cheese. Eventually, they plan to make their own goat cheese on the farm, and are in the process of building a cheese room.

The young couple is now in their third season on this farm, and is expecting their first baby in August. Bernhardt has an off-farm teaching job, with summers off, and Sessions teaches art classes as a sideline to farming. They told their visitors they make about half their income from the farm.

The farm they purchased was a cow dairy. Sessions and Bernhardt used some of the existing milk lines for their eight stanchion goat parlor. When they had 11 goats, they invested in milking machines.

They now milk 48, which is the number they think is ideal and where they want to be. The goats are milked at an elevated level, chest high for the milker, and they use Sydell head locks. Goats are fed 2-4 pounds of a 14 percent grain during milking, twice a day.

The couple is in the process of building a cheese house, adjacent to the milk room, where they have a 250 gallon bulk tank. To meet dairy plant regulations, they had to install a compost toilet in the barn. (A compost toilet meets the regulation with the least amount of upgrades). A pasteurizer is on order, and the room has been equipped with nonporous washable walls and a floor drain.

Moving to their grazing fields, the cou-

ple explained they had received a SARE grant and that money paid to install a six-strand high tensile perimeter fence. They have a 40 acre piece of pasture that floods each year and is too rough to harvest with machines. Part of the aim of the SARE grant was to experiment with using the floodland as part of the grazing rotation, and to monitor the herd health. The goats' hooves in particular will be observed, and Sessions said foot rot has been a problem when grazing in the wetland.

Sessions said they set up their grazing system initially on paper, with lanes, "but the goats wouldn't go that way, they wanted to come to the ledge." So she gave up on what would have been a typical grid system, and instead is working around the ledge, in a wheel shape.

Each paddock is about 80 x 80 yards, and the goats spend from seven to ten days in a paddock. "It's not ideal," Bernhardt said, but they are limited by the amount they can afford to invest in fencing. "Fencing is expensive, but we just ordered some more," he said.

The farm is comprised of 130 acres, with about 80 acres open and the rest wooded. Bernhardt pointed out, "Books tell you to have four goats per acre, so we're not keeping up with it," with their 120 animals. Next year, they plan to fence less land for grazing, and have their neighbors hay more of the land.

The couple did not invest in a lot of equipment, and are hiring their neighbors to cut fields for hay. They own one tractor and a manure spreader. They frost seeded clover this year, buying 100 pounds and spreading about 2.5 pounds

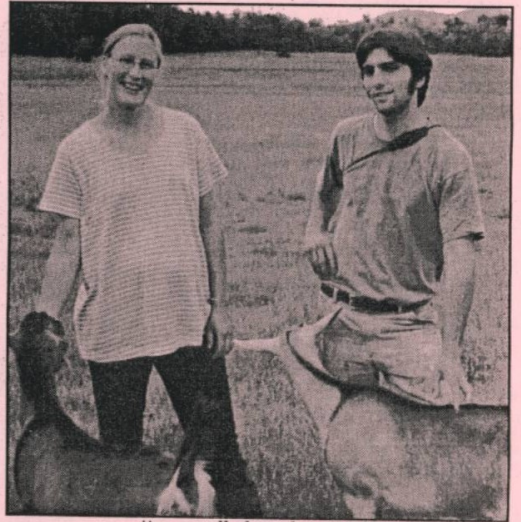
per acre.

Caring for goats involves the twice a day milking when they receive grain, feeding a free choice mineral and bicarbonate, and providing water and access to shade. The animals' hooves are trimmed about three times a year. Sessions said she wormed her goats last year, but "milk production dropped, and it never came back up." This year she is experimenting with herbal wormers.

The goats produce an average of 4,000 pounds of milk per year. They are all on a seasonal schedule, dry in winter from



A La Mancha goat, a breed developed in the US that has many favorable characteristics as a dairy goat.



Hannah Sessions and Greg Bernhardt with some of their herd of 48 milking goats. The couple owns a farm in Leicester and hosted a pasture walk June 25. Photos by Sherry Russell

Christmas to early March. The milk is paid for on a protein basis, and this herd is producing a 3.21 protein milk, with 3.5% butterfat. Vermont Butter & Cheese pays \$8.50 per point in summer, and more in winter to encourage year round production.

The milk is picked up twice a week, and the farmers have to pay \$50 per pickup. This couple also has a small flock of sheep, and they market wool and freezer lamb.

La Mancha Breed

The farm is made up of Alpine and Nubian goats, and some of the newer American breed, the La Mancha. This is a breed that is recognized as a separate North American breed, developed in California, but its ancestors are believed to

times called gopher or elf ears, with gopher being the most desirable. Small ears are genetically dominant and will be passed on in the offspring of any buck with gopher ears.

The La Mancha is of medium size but is very strong and hardy and well suited to northern conditions. They make excellent dairy animals but produce a little less milk than the Swiss breeds. A good La Mancha doe should average 3 liters of milk per day over a 10 month lactation. Any color or combination of colors is acceptable to the breed (according to information found on a web site).

The pasture walk was sponsored by the University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture. To learn more about future programs, call #(802) 656-5459, or email: susagctr@zoo.uvm.edu.



Standing in what is seasonally a wetland, Greg and Hannah need questions to the group.