

SO, YOU WANT TO DO MEAT GOATS?

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Preface

Following his retirement in 1993 from a forty year University career encompassing teaching, extension, research, administration, and international work in animal science with the last fifteen years focusing on goats for milk, fiber, and meat, Dr. Frank Pinkerton established a smallholder meat goat enterprise in eastern Texas, primarily for the production of Youth Show wethers and commercial breeding females. He also undertook private, USDA, and University consultant assignments in management and marketing of meat goats. In 1994/5, while on a consultancy to the Rural Economic Development Center/Mid-Carolina Council of Governments, he edited, and contributed to, the creation of a Handbook on meat goat production and marketing. Among his several contributions was one concerning the procurement of foundation stock for initiating or expanding meat goat enterprises. It was a relevant topic then—and would seem especially so now, given the current, documented need to increase the national supply of goats to meet rapidly expanding consumer demand. The following is an updated, expanded version of the original to reflect current challenges and opportunities for meat goat owners.

Introduction

Since the late seventies, I have observed with professional concern, personal interest, and occasional alarm as owners and prospective owners considered expanding or initiating goat enterprises. Prior to reaching final decisions, some skillfully investigated, in-depth, the opportunities, constraints, and most probable cost-benefit ratios of various management and marketing alternatives; however, others made only cursory investigations of enterprise options, the “fit” of their available resources, market availability/stability, etc. As might be expected, the success rate of such enterprise introductions and expansions was spotty indeed. In some states, disappointments, if not disasters, exceeded successes by considerable measure for several years (until bad experiences thinned out the losers and shared good experiences enabled improved success rates).

Among the most common failings exhibited, the tendency to start too big, or to get too big too fast, was paramount. This tendency was exacerbated when too little technical knowledge was teamed with inflated expectations and (too) short-term financing. A second common failing was to start the operation prematurely, i.e., to get the goats on-site before sufficient fencing, facilities, supplemental feed, and predator/parasite control programs were in place. A third failing was to only belatedly realize that slaughter goat prices exhibit marked seasonal highs and lows and, furthermore, that marketing venues, transportation costs, shrinkage, and commission fees are also

important cost considerations, not mere adjuncts to goat production. To some, a fourth difficulty was the surprising revelation that their friendly extension service person and Veterinarian who were ever so knowledgeable concerning local forage crops, beef cattle production, and animal health care didn't know shit about goat production, or even exhibit much interest in such exotic beasts. A corollary interpersonal problem sometimes occurred when good-intentioned goat-owning neighbors (with too little experience coupled with compensating motor mouths) were found, well after the fact, not to know shit, either.

For those currently contemplating the establishment or expansion of a meat goat enterprise, early recognition and detailed investigation of the several different types of operations to choose from would be most useful. Among the alternatives, each of which will require variable levels of financial commitments, different physical resources, and site-specific management schemes, are: smallholder/intensively managed herds; larger scale extensively managed herds; small, elite purebred seed stock herds, large purebred "expander" herds; specialized herds for the production of Youth Show wethers; herds held primarily for control of brushy/weedy lands or vegetation management of forest under-story, fire lanes, power lines, and water impoundments; and hobby herds subsidized for lifestyle enjoyment. Only after the final choice among types of enterprise has been made can one logically take further, specific actions, as described below.

Procurement of foundation stock

Selection of animals

Rational procurement of initial stock to implement the chosen type of enterprise requires that the owner first select a breed of meat goat and, thereafter, select individual animals within that breed. The breed chosen may be purebreds or "grades" (crossbreds). Readers should recognize that opinions regarding the one "correct" breed of goat for a given need vary quite widely (mathematically speaking, this may be put as: the number of such opinions is equal to the number of the discussants (squared) multiplied by the number of breeds known to the discussants). In point of fact, too little reliable data is available to enable analytically precise cost-benefit comparisons between breeds and their various crosses; live with it. On the other hand, some consideration should probably be given to the relative numbers of certain breeds and their most numerous crosses as to production locales and market venues.

Having arbitrarily but realistically guessed at the best breed for the enterprise, owners then must select individuals with attention to age/sex requirements of the initial herd. Selection of individuals is a rather imprecise undertaking at best. The basic assumption involved in visual selection is that there exists a reasonably close relationship between the physical appearance (phenotype) of an animal and its actual performance (genotype, as measured

by its physiological functions of maintenance, growth, reproduction, lactation, and fattening as expressed in its responses to various physical environments). There is a further assumption, namely, that the selector knows (via training and/or experience) these imperfect relationships at least well enough to beat a random gate-cut procedure. Some do, some do not. In any case, the inexperienced are urged to obtain experienced help in choosing foundation animals; if errors still occur (as they surely will), blame may be conveniently placed.

As I have told many times in many places, evaluating/selecting the most desirable goat is rather like assessing pornography--it is fairly easy to do, but it is pure hell to describe. For instance, blemishes, health status, desirable structural traits, size/age ratios, body condition scores, and breed characteristics are relatively easier to evaluate/describe than are body conformation scores and (prospective) carcass grades. Reproductive efficiency/potential (fertility rate, milk production, mothering ability, longevity) is very difficult to visually assess, while trying to look for evidences of high feed conversion efficiency, daily feed intake, and rate of gain is an exercise in futility.

Pricing of foundation animals

Purchasing foundation meat goats typically involves considerable, perhaps faith-based confidence in one's capability to recognize a really good deal. Over the years, I have seen good deals and bad deals and some deals not easily categorized. The confluence of money or easy credit, buyer ignorance about goats/management/marketing with goat sellers (or traders) deeply steeped in the principles of free enterprise and unfettered by any real notions of observing the Golden Rule, can, and often does, result in serious financial disadvantage to novice buyers. As always, there is some lag time between the transaction and the dawning realization (as suspicion turns to certainty) that the deals were nowhere as good as the buyers previously thought. And, since most gullible buyers are loath to ever admit to themselves their documented poor judgment and demonstrated inept bartering skills, their common reaction is to place the blame solely on the seller. In such instances, shrewd sellers may, often with ill-concealed amusement, righteously point out that there really is no such thing as a correct/right price for a goat; caveat emptor, friend.

It follows, then, that the price of a goat in the real world is whatever the two parties agree to, then and there; nothing else counts. Those thinking otherwise are both gullible and vulnerable; accordingly, they are near certain to suffer the consequences of their shortcomings—usually sooner than later. In a rational, economically equitable goat world, buyers of foundation stock would logically expect to pay prices rather closely related to the (most likely) prices/returns to be received from the sale of subsequent off-spring. Unfortunately, such expectations are too often not realized, largely because

inexperienced buyers are no match for veteran sellers possessing a gift for believable hyperbole, particularly concerning pretty, fat goats of “outstanding quality”, and priced right, of course.

My own estimate of a fair price for a young (yearling or two year old), non-pregnant foundation-quality animal is one that should not exceed the current or likely sales value of two 50 lb market wethers (selection grade 2). To illustrate, such animals are currently selling for \$1.10/lb; therefore, \$110 would be the maximum price to be offered for the foundation doe. Readers should be keenly aware that such a doe might, in five years or so, have an (estimated) salvage value of only \$50 and thus engender a lifetime depreciation loss of \$60 ($110 - 50 = 60$). This \$60, plus \$44 to cover interest charges ($\$110 @ 8\% \times 5 \text{ yrs}$) totals \$104 which must be spread over her five year saleable kid crop of, say, eight kids--a charge of \$13/kid. Assuming the doe's maintenance costs (feed, health, breeding fees, repairs, fuel, etc.) to total \$40/annum, brings the annual cost to \$53/doe ($13 + 40$). If she sold 1.6 kids weighing 50 lbs each (net, after shrinkage) for a \$1.10/lb (net, after marketing expenses), her annual gross would be \$88 ($80 \text{ lbs} \times 1.10$) and her net would be \$35 ($88 - 53$) for the year. This sobering, yet realistic net annual earnings figure per doe is certainly reason enough to warn against overpaying for foundation females.

Similar calculations should be applied to prospective herd sires whose estimated cost-benefit ratio must include charges for depreciation, interest on purchase cost, and annual maintenance. This total, divided by the number of does bred during his tenure, will yield a figure to be included in the annual maintenance charge for each doe. For commercial slaughter kid production, this figure simply must be kept well below \$3/doe. For those enterprises selling animals at well above slaughter prices (for breeding stock or wether goat projects), relatively higher prices for bucks can be justified (as also for does, of course).

As a broker and smallholder producer, I sold during the last decade well over 2,000 female meat goats as well as small numbers of intact male kids, yearlings, and adults. Over 90% of the females I sold were doelings (mostly Spanish and Boer/Spanish crosses 4 to 10 months of age). They went to buyers who did not wish to pay the relatively higher prices prevailing for young does (as described above). Establishing/expanding a commercial herd with doelings can be something of a gamble....they may prove to be undersized at breeding age (7-10 months); some may be prematurely pregnant; some may have dysfunctional mammary anatomy; some may be late breeders; some may never breed; and those that do breed will have a lower incidence of twinning. Given these caveats, I, along with others, priced such goats at a variable premium over the going San Angelo, TX auction price for slaughter kids of approximately the same age/weight/condition. Such premiums ranged \$5-12/head depending on prevailing price levels,

quantity taken, and, of course, my perception of individual buyer's interest—and knowledge. Insofar as I know, no customer ever came to lasting harm from these transactions; indeed, some became repeat buyers and/or provided referrals or recommendations.

For those contemplating the purchase of purebred foundation females, I strongly suggest that you should pay no more than the expected downstream selling price of two breeding-quality, weaned doelings. To do so, except in unusual situations, would almost guarantee pain and recrimination. Note that the economically rational maximum price to be paid for a purebred buck is much more difficult to estimate because of its' unpredictable salvage or resale value, but, in any case, the cost-accounting procedure is exactly the same (and so, too, is the chance for pain and suffering).

Those contemplating entry into the purebred goat business are urged to proceed very cautiously indeed. Relatively deep pockets are required to get in; an understanding and well-employed spouse is required to stay in. And, should you buy in at overly inflated prices, it might well require divine intervention for you to ever make a profit (or even to manage a quick, only modestly disastrous exit).

Sourcing foundation goats

Having made the required leap of faith to do goats and then having decided: 1) the kind of enterprise, 2) its initial scale, 3) level of investment, 4) breed, 5) purebred or grade, 6) numbers/ages/sexes, it is now time to buy goats (but only if facilities/fences/predator controllers/etc. are actually ready). Note that this is no time for unilateral decision-making; do include your spouse by all means—the average modern marriage is unlikely survive an acrimonious goat controversy. Moreover, you should give early notice to your neighbors regarding the imminent arrival of goats at their boundaries, and also allay their fears of transmissible diseases, fence-crawling, overgrazing, water pollution, excessive noise, exotic odors, and overt sex; doing so may help you avoid abrupt loss of personal reputation and possibly social standing.

When should you buy goats?

Historically, the supply/availability of desirable, saleable goats of various ages, sizes, sexes, and reproductive status varies across years, seasons, and locations. Accordingly, there seems be no economically optimum time to purchase foundation goats (except perhaps during those instances in which environmental conditions in a given area force large scale selling—and concomitant lower prices to bargain buyers). On the other hand, individual buyers usually have rather particular needs regarding numbers, ages, mating/kidding times to meet seasonal marketing targets, site-specific feeding programs, stocking rates, etc. Consequently, resolution of this recurring supply/demand dilemma is, as earlier described, dependent on

two-party price negotiations.

Where should you buy goats?

If possible, you should purchase goats as close to your location as possible. This not only reduces transportation costs and hauling stress, it also lets you take advantage of any earlier environmental acclimation to your area; moreover, it might well be good “p.r.” for both players. However, if you determine that your precise needs and acceptable prices can not be obtained locally, you have no choice but to look further afield. Spanish-type goats and their various crosses are concentrated in the Texas Hill Country (nearly a million head, currently), but there are others, usually in smaller herds, in the southeast and border states. Purebred Boer goats and Kiko goats are now at scattered locations in these same states and, increasingly, in the mid-Atlantic and northeast as also on the west coast.

There are a number of ways to identify possible sources of foundation stock, among them: commercial monthly publications, breed magazines, state and regional Goat Association newsletters, University agricultural extension offices, State Departments of Agriculture, Internet Websites, and, as always, interconnected producer referrals.

Who do you buy goats from?

This is a question even more difficult than: what is an equitable price? Goats may be purchased from: public auctions, private auctions (individual or group consignments), traders/brokers/order buyers, or ranchers and farmers. In my long experience as player/observer, buying directly from goat owners of decent reputation has proven to be the least painful for most purchasers. Livestock owners in general and many goat owners in particular know from first-hand, sometimes evil experience, that public auctions are places to sell, not to buy. The probability of getting decent quality, healthy goats at such venues is not great, although their prices will likely be comparatively lower than at private treaty sales. Buying through intermediaries (brokers, etc.) can be--indeed, often is—an uncertain, sometimes painful, exercise, the major difficulties being the source, health, and quality of goats being offered. In any case, you are dead certain to pay a premium over farm-gate prices (as earlier described in the section on pricing).

My first choice is to go to ranchers from whom I have bought goats previously or, secondly, to go to ranchers of well-known, reputable standing or, thirdly, if I am unable to get away, I recommend to the prospective buyer an order-buyer of proven capability and demonstrated integrity. Normally, I select my own purchases on-site and always from an excess of offerings; that way I can cull those that don't suit me and, if my selections don't suit me or my client, I have only myself to blame (as does my client). For those of you lacking in goat buying experience, I strongly urge you to make use of

an advisor...consultant, order-buyer, successful goat producer, whatever.

It is, of course, possible that, as a greenhorn buyer, you could locate a descent set of goats at an equitable price by yourself. It is not, however, very probable—i.e., the odds are distinctly not in your favor. You simply can not logically expect that most sellers of goats would have your interest foremost in their minds during the negotiations. Goat owners are neither more nor less notable for their charitable treatment of unsuspecting buyers than are any other livestock owners. Indeed, any tendencies toward eleemosynary endeavors in general may be strongly resisted, except perhaps at Christmas or on the Sabbath. (Even then, the IRS is extremely suspicious that reported deductions often exceed actual contributions by an astonishing multiple). So....cuidado, hombre, y vaya con Diosbe careful, man, and go with God....whom you may come to sorely need, as also a sympathetic and patient banker, should you elect to sally forth without benefit of more worldly counsel.

How do you get your new goats home?

Having selected your goats, paid your tab, and had a celebratory handshake, it is now time to load-out. Loading goats, particularly from rather rustic facilities, can be a bit more thrilling than you might suppose; coarse language, agility, and perseverance are usually required in good measure. Contrarily, hauling goats is not a particular problem if your unit will hold convicts or water. More precisely, side boards need to be not less than 54 inches high on open trailers and pickups. Concerning required floor spacing, we have successfully used 1.25 square feet/goat for weanlings, 1.5 ft for 50/60 pounders, 1.75 for 80/90 pounders, and 2.0 for larger goats. Commercial haulers commonly pack them tighter, saying that the goats haul better (it also reduces hauling cost/head/mile but only if the goats are all alive and reasonably well on arrival; this may not be the case.

Hauling costs/head vary widely depending on distance, carrier size, owner/driver, etc. Currently, commercial “pots” can move goats at about \$2.25/loaded mile; double-deck gooseneck rigs (150/250 head) may be had for \$1.60 or so per loaded mile. Driving your own pickup/trailer for smaller loads may easily engender costs in excess of a \$1.00/loaded mile (actual out-of-pocket trip expenses will be less, of course, but, you can not ignore depreciation, repairs, etc. forever).

How far or long can you haul goats without off-loading? Slaughter goats are commonly hauled from San Angelo, TX to the NJ/PA non-stop....18/1900 miles in 36-40 hours. The stress on such goats is high and a small percentage may die. The usual shrinkage is 3-4% (5-6 % if calculated on the original farm weight). More often than not, most were not properly handled prior to loading.

You can reduce stress on keeper goats by reducing floor density, by watering and feeding them 2-3 hours prior to loading, by driving carefully, and staying on interstates insofar as possible. If you are taking more than 24 hours, an 8 hour rest stop would be beneficial, but it might not be physically possible or economically feasible. The hassle of off-loading/reloading is also stressful. Lengthy rest stops without off-loading are negative in effect and not recommended.

In any case, when you get the goats home, put them into an isolated, grassed paddock with adequate watering space; offer hay if needed, but no grain; provide shelter only if weather conditions warrant. Thereafter, observe them closely for the next few days, removing any “suspicious” individuals for appropriate action. Note that it may take several days for respiratory and other problems to surface. There is some controversy regarding use of various antibiotics just prior to shipment or shortly after arrival. I don’t, but others do so, even while conceding that the extra hassle during treatment may be detrimental. Sometimes goats show diarrhea on or shortly after arrival. This is more likely to be a reaction to stress than a gastrointestinal “bug” of some sort. Clean water, adequate nutrition, and elapsed time will frequently see a quick return to proper goat pills. On the other hand, treatment may sometimes be necessary; either way, such quandaries add to one’s experience.

Summary

This article identifies several concerns and possible actions that merit serious and early consideration by those contemplating expansion or establishment of a meat goat herd. In-depth investigation and comparative evaluation of optional management strategies and tactics would do much to minimize subsequent mistakes and lessen the financial pain commonly associated with pore-ass planning and corrective on-the-job training. Indeed, failure to make proper assessment of opportunities, constraints, and options will all but ensure that your life, with or without goats, will be less than it could be. But, having reached the final decision to do goats, proceed with caution, enthusiasm, and perseverance. If all goes reasonably well, new-found confidence will follow apace; if it does not go as well as expected, new-found education will be your reward. In either case, you can subsequently speak knowingly with the certitude of been-there-done-that experience.