

Sheep and Goats Come to the Rescue

A mix of livestock and grass species added flexibility and reduced risk for this operation.

By Del Deterling

Down deep, Cam and Deb Manahan are probably thankful for the drought of 1996. It forced them to make changes in their ranching operation that have given them more flexibility to handle livestock price cycles. And it has definitely improved their bottom line.

"We were running 75 cows on 300 acres of pasture and 100 acres of woodlands," Cam reports. "We were way overstocked. The 1996 drought about broke us."

The Manahans sold most of their cows. Then they bought 50 Boer-cross and Spanish goats. Their initial objective was to use the goats to clean out small brush that had invaded their pastures. They quickly discovered that they had tapped into a new and growing market.

By 1998, the Manahans had built up their herd to 15 registered nannies and 200 commercial goats. The following year, they added sheep to their enterprise. They now have 50 registered and 100 crossbred nannies, 110 ewes and 20 cows near Fairfield, Texas. They also custom graze 75 yearlings, sell seed and hay, and have 100 laying hens.

"We've uncovered some attractive markets for both goats and sheep with the expanding population of immigrants from southeast Asia," Deb says.

The Manahans' most lucrative market is for the registered nannies and ewes that they provide to other breeders. They sell a few show animals

and are exporting breeding sheep to Mexico. Most of their commercial sheep are sold through an auction barn in Goldthwaite. But their primary market for goats is individual sales directly off the farm for barbecues and goat-tying events in rodeos.

"This program has definitely improved our profit margins from when we were running only cows," Deb reports. "We can run seven goats on the same acreage as we need for one cow. Most of our goats produce twins twice a year, so that's 20 to 28 animals that we have to sell each year. A commercial goat will net about \$50."

Registered nannies are Boer goats from South Africa. Commercial nannies are bred to registered Boer bucks. The sheep include Dorpers from South Africa—a meat animal that sheds its hairy fleece in summer—registered St. Croix ewes, and crossbred and full-blooded Katahdin ewes.

The combination of goats, sheep and cows enables the Manahans to get fuller use of their grasslands. Their pasture makeup includes coastal and native bermudagrasses overseeded with clovers; coastal and native bermudas overseeded with ryegrass and ball clover; and bahiagrass and ball clover.

"Cows prefer grass, sheep like clovers and the goats go after the tougher grasses and briars," Cam notes.

Pastures are divided into 2-acre paddocks with electrified tape and plastic flex-net fencing for intensive rotational grazing. A pipeline carries water to tubs in individual paddocks.



Cam and Deb Manahan found that goats and sheep were a perfect fit with cattle to get more use from pastures. PHOTO:

Del Deterling

Basically, they follow a three-day rotation. In some cases, they run sheep and goats separately; in others, the two species are combined. Cows generally are kept separate.

During peak grass-production periods, the Manahans lease out grazing on a per-day basis. They took in some cows last year, and currently they are running yearlings. They also harvest ball-clover seed.

Last year, the Manahans added another enterprise—free-range chickens. One hundred Rhode Island Red, Australorp and Buff Orpington hens forage on grasshoppers and fly larvae during the day. At night, they roost in a 6- x 20-foot shed that is built on a flatbed trailer. The manure drops on the ground, providing fertilizer for the grass. The trailer is moved every three days. The Manahans have found a ready on-farm market for the eggs from local consumers.

Long-range plans are to expand to 800 ewes and 100 registered goats, and possibly to switch from cows to stockers.

"Our goal is to be netting \$1,000 an acre from 200 acres of improved pasture from the sale of animals, seed and eggs by 2004," Deb announces.