



Surrounded by his large herd dogs, Larry Peterson looks out over his herd of 700 Boer goats that are being used by Maddux Cattle Company to control invasive species on their pasture land. (Republican photo)

Benefit of goats not limited to invasive species control

By Russ Pankonin
THE IMPERIAL REPUBLICAN

What started out as an experiment for Larry and Bruce Peterson has spurred new opportunities for the father-son team.

Last year, the Petersons started buying goats to be used for the control of invasive species, such as musk and Canada thistle, cedars, willows, etc.

During their first year, they ran their goats on property where the owners wanted to control vegetation and invasive species.

They didn't even charge the property owners last year. Fortunately for them, the demand for a chemical-free option to remove invasive species meant they could lease their goats out for the year this year.

Larry runs a herd of about 700 head while Bruce runs another herd of about 60. Bruce also has another 30 head of registered stock that he uses for breeding and replacement stock.

When selecting a breed of goat, the Petersons chose the Boer goat. This breed displays fast growth characteristics, is adjustable to about any climate, and most importantly, has a large frame which produces more meat, with dressing weight percentages over 50 percent.

Demand for goat meat

Why would meat be a factor in the decision? The Petersons said there is a growing demand for goat meat in the United States.

In fact, 65-70 percent of all the red meat consumed throughout the world is goat meat.

While mutton has been consumed in the U.S. for many years, goat meat is not something commonly found in stores or restaurant menus.

That could change as the state sheep and goat growers associations make a push to promote the red meat alternative. It features a lower fat content than beef with similar protein content and less saturated fat than skinless chicken.

Bruce said the increase in U.S. population of ethnic people where goat is a main staple is helping to push demand in the U.S.

In an effort to raise awareness about the goat meat opportunities, Steve Grams, the local representative on the Southwest Nebraska Resource and Conservation District (RC&D), set up a supper for their board and other individuals with goat meat as the main fare.

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The dishes, which were prepared by On Broadway, featured rib chops, barbecued roast, a stir fry with goat chuck and hamburgers made from goat meat.

People who enjoyed the meal found the taste and texture of the meat to be much better than they expected. The goat meat does not carry any type of the distinct flavor common in mutton.

The hamburger proved surprisingly lean and was hard to distinguish from beef hamburger.

Bruce said they often mix the two together when making burgers.

Sponsors of the supper included Pinnacle Bank, Adams Bank & Trust, Maddux Land & Cattle and DirkandSteve.com.

Larry said the sale barn in Gothenburg has built a vibrant market for goats. Many of the goats that pass through the ring are purchased by buyers for packing companies.

He said the larger goats are sold by the pound with the younger goats sold by the head.

The market prices are better in the fall and winter months compared to the summer months, he added. He said they topped out last year at about \$1.30 per pound.

He said they use a packer in Elwood to process the goats they slaughter for their personal use.

Goats clean up invasive species

While the goats may not be known yet for their meat qualities, they are definitely held in high regard for their ability to clean up invasive species in pastures, bottom land and along creeks and rivers.

Peterson said he's been running his 700-head herd on land owned by Maddux Cattle Company.

Maddux's manager, Harlow Hill, had told Larry Peterson they had musk thistle in some bottoms that they had sprayed for several years without any success.

That's not the case this year with Peterson's goats.

While the goats also eat the grass where they run, they also clean out the thistles, trees and other shrubs that invade pasture land and creek and river bottoms.

Peterson uses a plastic fence that also carries electric current to confine the goats to a certain area. He said he has enough fence to encompass four to five acres.

In areas the goats have grazed, the thistle has been eaten down to the bare stem, just inches above the ground.

Peterson said this non-chemical approach still takes two to three years of grazing to get control over the thistle, due to dormant seed already in the ground.

He said the best control is gained by getting the goats into the thistle before it goes to seed.

The big herd is tended 24 hours a day by three large Great Pyrenees dogs that are specifically bred as herd dogs.

Peterson said he hasn't lost any of his goats to coyotes because of the herd dogs. There are usually plenty of coyote tracks around the herd in the morning, Peterson said, but the dogs keep them at bay.



Southwest Nebraska RC&D board members Ted Tietjen of Grant, left, and Bill Zahl of Stratton, right, fill their plates with a variety of dishes made with goat meat during a supper held in Imperial recently. (Republican photo)



Three small stubs are all that's left of three musk thistle plants eaten down by goats on grassland owned by Maddux Cattle Company. (Republican photo)

Peterson said they move the herd about every three to four days by dragging the fence around.

He said they try to do it early in the morning while the herd is still bedded down for the night.

Since they have been running the goats on the creek and river bottoms, they don't have to water them, making them pretty self sufficient.

Peterson said they did have to water the goats for a couple weeks last winter when the Stinking Water Creek froze over.

Overall, both father and son say they are excited by their new venture and feel there are real opportunities ahead.