

Our Farmstead Dairy Experiences at Skylonda

Jim Bailey

The goal at Skylonda Ranch is to raise animals in a sustainable manner. We are interested in animals that obtain most of their nutrition from pasture grazing instead of requiring a high level of supplements. In addition, we are not seeking the maximal production numbers that a commercial factory farm operation requires. We instead seek an integrated solution that provides added value for added effort.

Icelandic sheep are the primary animals at Skylonda, because of their versatility and ability to fit into a grass based operation. They provide two types of fiber, in a wide variety of colors. The meat is gourmet quality and can be raised on well-managed good pastures without requiring large inputs of grain for finishing. The possibility of grassed based milk production is an added bonus. We did not originally plan on milking, but thought it was a good future option

During the spring of 2003, we tried milking a few ewes by hand, just to see how it went. Our approach was to separate the ewes from the lambs in the evening, milk the next morning, and put them back together for the day. We did not milk every day and only continued this for a period of several weeks. Our experience was that we were getting between 0.5 and 1.2 liters of milk from each ewe at each milking. We used the milk around the house for cooking and drinking.

Our milking setup was an old wooden goat-fitting stand with two boards in the shape of a "V" that latch to hold the ewe. The sheep quickly learned that going into the stall away from their lambs meant treats and they were very easy to work with. Since we had not milked by hand before, it took 5 to 10 minutes per sheep, but it was restful enjoyable time spent talking to them and enjoying their company. We had one ewe that did not like to be milked. She would step around and tip over the bucket if she could. We chose to not milk her more than a few times and focused our effort on the ewes with better dispositions.

Based on this experience, we decided to repeat in the spring of 2004 with more ewes and a milking machine. The milking machine we chose is a surge bucket system attached to a vacuum pump and set-up for one ewe at a time. The bucket holds about 2.5 gallons of milk, so it is light and easy to work with.

We continued with the old wooden fitting stand and milking one sheep at a time. With this configuration, we spent more time handling each ewe than in milking her. The ewes waited in a pen off the milking room and quickly learned to enter the room and get on the stand for a treat. It often took more effort to move them out of the milking room than to get them in and on the milking stand.

This process was still quicker than milking by hand, especially when we got up to 24 to 28 ewes per day

Our original plan was to milk all of the ewes in the flock, starting once-a-day milking when their lambs were two weeks old, weaning the lambs at 6 weeks and then continuing until the ewes dried up. We were going to use the milk around the house, make some cheeses with it, and feed the remainder to the hogs. As with all plans, things did not go as expected, but we still learned a lot.

The idea of milking once per day and allowing the lambs to nurse the rest of the time, seems to be a good plan for a homestead dairy. During the first four to six weeks of lactation, the ewe is producing milk at her highest rate and we found twin lambs were able to continue growing well, even with us taking some of the milk. We did not do regular weighing of the lambs, nor did we have a control group not being milked, so we don't have formal results. Our informal experience is that earlier lambs did better than later ones and that the ewes that produced the most milk for us also had the lambs that were doing the best.

One problem was that with off-farm demands on our time, we did not milk every day. But, again this matches casual farmstead milking instead of commercial production. We did not see significant changes in milk production numbers from days when we milked 3-4 days in a row compared to milking every other day or even 1 out of three days. The changes we saw in production levels could all be traced back to things like pasture quality and amounts of fresh water available to the ewes. For example, one night the water trough had a leak and went dry and we had reduced production the next morning.

Our spring flush of pasture growth starts in late February or early March and begins tapering off with the dryness and heat of June. During our milking time, we supplemented the ewes with free choice alfalfa hay during the night, when they were not free out on pasture. We used a small amount of pea pellets, about 1/2 pound per day, as a treat to bring them in and to eat while being milked.

Initially there were 35 ewes that lambed. We eliminated two with triplets, two yearlings, and two with udder problems. This resulted in a total of 29 ewes that were milked at least once during the trial period. We started with 7 ewes and increased to a daily maximum of 26. During this time we rejected three ewes for temperament, one would lie down on the milking machine and the other two were hard to catch and would not get onto the milking stand on their own. We did not originally select for the milkiest ewes, but we did drop a couple that only gave us .2 pounds of milk per day. (Their numbers are still in the overall averages, but only for four or five milkings.)

We started milking on April 22nd and continued for 7 weeks, averaging three times a week. After a two-week lapse, we milked again four times in the final week. Although this is not an ideal milking schedule and our numbers do not reflect the total production that would be possible, we do have some numbers showing how milk production varied over early lactation and how it varied with the age of the ewe. Our ewes ranged in age from 2 to 6 years old. One was 6 years old, six were 4 years old, and 5 were 3. We have been told that milk production increases with age until 3 or 4, and then levels off, so most of our ewes are not to their peak production ages.

The best ewe produced an average of 1.2 pounds of milk over the first 7 weeks. The flock average was 0.8 pounds of milk with the top 12 ewes producing more than this average. We had four ewes that averaged over 1.0 pounds per day, with their best days being 1.4 to 1.6 pounds per milking. The worst ewe was a two year old who only produced 0.2 pounds of milk or about 1/2 cup of milk. All the other ewes produced at least 0.5 pounds or 1 cup of milk per milking. Of the poorer producing ewes, all but two were two years old and these two were sisters. Based on this experience, we believe that with selecting for milk production and several generations of experience we would be able to increase the average significantly.

During this seven-week period, the milk production per ewe stayed fairly constant. We started milking when the first ewes had two-week-old lambs and quit when they were 10 weeks old. Not milking for a week, during a time when the lambs were on pasture and starting to self-wean, significantly impacted milk production. The average production for the last week of this test was 0.6 pounds per ewe, or about 3/4 of what it had been earlier. Although some of the ewes did maintained their production levels during this time, most ewes declined. The ones that did maintain their levels were the better milkers overall.

Our pastures were starting to dry up at this time, so we weaned the lambs two weeks later and put them on the best pastures. The ewes were on poorer pastures, but all

started to recover condition as soon as they were not being milked or nursed. The worst ewe had dropped down in condition to a low 2 during this time. Most of the rest were between 2.0 and 2.5, with a very few above 2.5.

Although we did not milk daily and did not milk over the entire season, some extrapolations are not unreasonable. From our experience I would say that for our flock, being primarily on grass, and being milked once per day, that we can expect to get 1.0 pound of milk per ewe per day, if we eliminate the bottom 20% of the ewes. If we milked from two weeks of age and quit when pastures were bad, we could expect about 70 pounds of milk per ewe with once-a-day milking.

We did not milk the ewes out; their lambs were nursing as soon as the ewes left the milking area. If we were to milk twice a day, then production for this 10-week period of time would be more like 140 to 150 pounds of milk per ewe. If you are making farmstead cheese, then you could look to make about 1 pound of cheese for every 5 or 6 pounds of ewe's milk or about 25 pounds of cheese from each ewe if the lambs got nothing or 12 pounds of cheese if you shared with the lambs.

Since we did not milk more than 12 weeks, we don't have projections on how long the ewes would stay in production. Talking to other Icelandic breeders, we have been told that if they are milked continuously, they should stay in production for 4 to 5 months, which is similar to other breeds of sheep that are milked. Production does decline with the length of lactation, so a simple calculation of total milk possible production is not realistic.

From what we have been told, these numbers are about 1/2 of what you would get with East Friesians under typical conditions - thus, if you are going for maximal milk production then Icelandic sheep are probably not your best bet. If you are going for sheep that are easy to work with, provide great fleece and meat, and can produce reasonable quantities of milk on a pasture situation, then Icelandic sheep are a good option for the farmstead. ■

Guard Dogs and the Right to Farm

This is the substance of a decision by the Oregon Court of Appeals, on a case brought by Fran and Joe Mazzara of Hood River, Oregon, whose neighbors complained about excessive barking by their guard dogs, two Kuvasz who were livestock protection dogs.

The "Right to Farm" laws forbid any jurisdiction from establishing or citing any local "nuisance" laws that interfere with a legitimate farm's acceptable farming practice. The court decided that the use of livestock protection dogs and working dogs are legitimate farming practices and immune from any actions by any jurisdiction other than state laws.

This case established a precedent that may be cited in future cases across the United States. Fran Mazzara gave permission (nay, encouraged me) to spread the word about this case - she said it cost them a bundle and they want other dogs/farms to benefit from it. For further information, Fran can be reached at FMAZZARA@gorge.net

Micheal Desplaines