

Getting Started With Meat Goats

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I've had opportunity to watch many meat goat enterprises begin through my work in meat goat extension and as a producer. I'd like to share some considerations I think are critical for prospective producers to explore before getting started.

What do I expect from my meat goat operation? Many people start a meat goat operation with little financial planning. Goats are enjoyable animals. It's fun to go on expeditions to buy a few, and they multiply. When the realization hits that you are spending substantial time caring for a few goats and selling surplus kids, it's tempting to justify it by expanding into a commercial operation.

Before you do, try to determine what you expect from this enterprise, and research the feasibility of these expectations. How much money do you hope to make? Enough to contribute to your land taxes? Or, enough to quit your day job and support yourself on the farm? How do you feel about your own labor? Do you need to justify your labor by paying yourself a wage similar to what you would earn off farm? Or can you justify the labor as being valuable not for money but as a substitute for a workout at a health spa or as an aid to your mental well-being?

If you expect to raise goats as a means to quit your outside job, be sure to evaluate what other options you have. The great thing about goats is they are relatively easy to handle. And the death of one meat goat is usually easier to handle financially than the death of a larger, more expensive animal. But would you do better with another enterprise? Is your land suitable for vegetables or fruits, something with a higher return per acre than livestock? If so, do you have the capital and experience to get started in these businesses or absorb their risks? How are other livestock projects doing in your area? Have you explored dairy replacement heifers or specialty livestock?

Four important figures to have are: 1) the approximate annual costs of rearing a doe and her kids in your region; 2) average market value of slaughter goats; 3) the carrying capacity of your land and facilities; and 4) what sort of productivity you can expect from a doe under your farm conditions. One way to get estimates of these figures is to talk to other goat producers. However, some producers are so busy caring for their animals they have problems reciting these figures off the top of their head, or have a mental block against it. An example of some of these figures for my small high percentage Boer cross operation in Schuyler County, NY is available in the tables at the end of this article and illustrates how easily these parameters can change from year to year. Keep in mind that the numbers are from 1999 – 2000.

In truth, you will probably have to go to several sources to estimate these figures. Several resources and websites that provide educational materials to Northeast producers are listed in the Resource Spotlight accompanying this article. Some of these resources contain sample budgets and case studies. However, I need to emphasize the value of talking to local contacts to get realistic parameters for your area.

Finding out from local producers or agricultural extension agents how much money is being paid for slaughter kids may also serve as a reality check. If you are envisioning an enterprise based on show or breeding stock rather than commercial animals, you need to be realistic about market values, and about the percentage of your kid crop that you can reasonably expect to sell as anything but slaughter animals.

If you're thinking about breeding stock, are there shows for meat goats or a particular breed in your region? Are you prepared to put substantial energy into promotion and attending shows? Is there any reason that folks should buy breeding stock from you rather than the person you bought your breeding stock from? Is there a demand for 4-H market wethers in your area? Are you willing to promote 4H meat goat projects in your region to the point of being a 4-H leader?

Even if you limit yourself to selling slaughter animals, you can run into problems with accidentally inflating your expected profit. Are you basing the average price received for your large potential kid crop on what you've made selling a few kids yearly to a specialty customer? It is a good idea to first set up your financial plan using past prices from better known regional auctions during times of year when the demand for goat is high and see if you can break even. This exercise educates you about the time of year different types of slaughter goats are in demand, and also helps emphasize the importance of putting energy into making marketing contacts.

What goat meat market am I aiming for? You may eventually plan on selling direct to retailers, on-farm to consumers, or marketing a value-added product. The return from these enterprises should be more than selling live animals to meat packers, livestock dealers or marketing pools. However, these direct marketing strategies generally require extra expenditures in labor and/or capital. It is probably best to make the assumption in your first financial plan that you will initially sell through middlemen.

Even if selling through middlemen, you need to decide early on whether you will market suckling kids, weaned market kids or both. The demands and economic returns from each of these enterprises are different.

Suckling kids are milk fed, plump kids 3 months old or younger, and are especially in demand at Easter, Christmas and New Years. Prices received by producers for these kids range from about \$1.35 to \$2.10 per lb live weight and vary according to the quality of the kids and the access you have to competitive buyers. Unthrifty kids may sell for less than this, and farms selling directly to consumers or retailers may receive more especially when supply is short. Boer cross kids generally grade better than other kids. Buyers will generally have specific weight requirements somewhere between 18 to 55 lbs depending on their customer base and ethnicity.

It is easy to have kids for Easter but difficult to produce suckling kids for the winter holidays. This is because goats tend to breed in the fall when the days are getting shorter rather than in late spring when days are lengthening. Despite ease of getting does pregnant for Easter kids, keep in mind that does give birth 5 months after conception. Thus, Easter kids are born during winter. If you are going to produce them you absolutely need to invest in a draft free, comfortable, yet well ventilated barn and excellent winter feed to their dams during late pregnancy and lactation. Frigid temperatures at birth leading to frozen or weak newborns are the main problems with raising these kids. Pneumonia and bacterial diarrhea problems from poorly ventilated barns and over-crowding can also be problems.

In contrast, you can opt to produce market kids. These kids are in demand for Muslim Holidays and also at Christmas, New Years and Easter. They are often born in late March through early May and graze out on pastures until slaughter at anywhere from 45-90 lbs in late summer through early spring. Unlike suckling kid enterprises, you do not need a substantial barn. Instead, you need pasture (and a substantial investment in goat proof fencing) or an economic source of good quality roughage to base their diet on.

The amount of more expensive supplemental grain needed during late pregnancy and lactation and for weaned kids will depend on the quality of your roughage. These kids generally sell for less per lb than suckling kids, ranging from about \$.80 to \$1.25 per lb live weight depending on breed, quality and your access to buyers. Again, unhealthy animals may bring less, and direct sales may bring more,

especially when the demand is high and supply short. Internal parasites are probably the biggest problem with raising these kids.

What's a good herd size to start out with, and a good time of year to plan my first kidding season? I heartily recommend starting out with a smaller herd than your target size. One reason is that goats multiply fast once you get the hang of keeping kids alive. It's easy and generally economically sound to raise enough doe kids each year to expand your herd. For example, if you wean 1.5 kids per doe per year, which is about the minimum required to stay in business, you'll produce on average $\frac{3}{4}$ of your existing doe herd in doe kids each year. Some of these doe kids will replace dead or culled does but you'll still have plenty of doe kids to either sell or absorb back into your herd. If you do not have to sell doe kids the first few years, you can put more time into building a sound market for your male market kids.

Starting out small also gives you a chance to make mistakes in selecting your first breeding stock. If you inadvertently put together a poor herd, you don't have to commit to them forever. When selecting stock, take an experienced goat producer with you. Keep in mind that your goal is to select healthy does (or their daughters), free of contagious diseases, that have proven highly productive under herd management systems similar to yours. If you are going to pasture your animals be sure to choose from pastured herds.

Another reason to start with a smaller herd is that your first kidding season can be quite a learning experience. It is depressing and financially devastating to lose a lot of kids all at once. Starting out with a smaller herd gives you a chance to find out whether you really have your act together for kidding. However, I must qualify this by saying that kidding itself is usually not the problem. Most does on a healthy diet kid fine without intervention. The devastating losses generally occur after kidding, due to internal parasites and the various diseases goat kids are susceptible too. Better to test out how well your facilities and management strategies hold up to these threats while your herd is still small, and your risk is manageable.

It's also better to find out that you are not allowing enough space per doe or have overestimated the productivity of your pastures before you have a large herd. Plan on reaching your target herd size after your learning curve is starting to level out. Even if you have plenty of livestock experience, remember that you are trying out new facilities and/or locations. Coping with a wind chill of -15 F while kidding in a new location may not be in your plans, but it can happen.

If you must start out initially with a large herd (for example, your bank loan was contingent on getting maximum production from year one) then I want to emphasize that you need to commit to three things. First, start out with the smallest sized herd you can rationalize. Secondly, make arrangements with an experienced lamb or goat producer to garnish all the hands-on experience you can before your own does start to kid. Thirdly, avoid kidding in the winter during your first year. Instead, try to kid in the milder months. The Northeast US can be quite cruel to newborn goat kids and new owners during the winter. New owners often have trouble identifying the signs of imminent kidding. Newborn kids in frigid weather often need fast intervention by experienced producers to get them off to a good start.

If you're thinking about getting started with meat goats, I strongly advise that you put time into addressing the questions included here and preparing a solid financial plan. Contact local offices for the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Cornell Cooperative Extension to find out what sort of expertise and financial assistance may be available for your goat enterprise. If at all possible, start small, avoid winter kidding your first year, get all the hands-on experience you can prior to owning your own stock, and plan on continuing your education during your first years by networking with other producers and attending educational workshops.

Table 1. Example of Doe Productivity at a pasture-based meat goat operation in Schuyler Cty, NY

Parameter	1999	2000
Conception rate	25/25 = 100%	30/31 = 97%
Yearling litter size (live kids w/in wk of birth only)	17/11 = 1.46 kids	25/17 = 1.47 kids
Mature doe litter size (live kids only)	26/14 = 1.86 kids	28/13 = 2.15 kids
Kid mortality within 1 st wk (includes kids dead at birth)	3/46 = 6%	2/55 = 4%
Kid mortality 1 wk through 8 mo of age or sale	0/43 = 0%	0/53 = 0%
Doe mortality	0/25 = 0%	1/31 = 3%

Table 2. Example of Pasture Productivity as the number of Doe Unit Days (DUD) an acre can support at one pasture-based meat goat operation in Schuyler Cty, NY.

Grass/legume pastures	360-420 DUD/Acre	May – July ¹	Pass thru every 3 to 4 weeks for 5-7 day duration
Brush pastures	350 DUD/Acre	Aug –Sept ²	Pass thru once for 4 week duration
Grass/legume hayfields	240 DUD/Acre	Oct – Nov ³	Pass thru once for 5-7 day duration

¹Lactating does supplemented with 2 lbs grain per doe unit daily.

²Later lactation does and almost weaned kids supplemented with 1 lb grain per doe unit daily.

³Dry does and weaned kids.

Table 3. Example of income and expenses at a pasture-based based meat goat enterprise in Schuyler Cty, NY

Actual cash outlay or receipts	1999 (25 doe units)	2000 (30 doe units)
Total cash income¹	\$3265 or \$130.60 per doe unit	\$5064.75 or \$168.82 per doe unit
Herd upkeep ²	\$1325 (25 doe units)	\$1500 (30 doe units)
Supplies & tractor expenses	\$487.50	\$240
Depreciation on capital	\$690	\$690
Total expenses easily attributed to goats	\$2502.50 or \$100.10 per doe unit	\$2430 or \$81 per doe unit
Money available for taxes, insurance, improvements	\$762.50 or \$35 per doe unit	\$2634.75 or \$87.82 per doe unit

¹**Cash income** included sale of some male kids and excess does and doe kids for breeding stock (average price received ~ \$116.00) and sale of slaughter goats (average price received ~\$70 although majority of kids sold for \$80 at approximately 80 lbs).

²**Herd upkeep** included only hay (winter), supplementary grain, mineral salt, wormer, vaccines, veterinary supplies and services.

For More Information on Meat Goats...

For more information on meat goats visit www.smallfarms.cornell.edu. Click on *Production*, then click on *Livestock*

Small Ruminant Marketing Listserve, **SRMARKETING-L**. An active email discussion forum serving Northeast sheep and goat producers. To subscribe, send a message to tls7@cornell.edu, with the subject line "add to srmarketing-l". In the body of the message put subscribe smarketing-L Firstname Lastname, where "Firstname Lastname" is your real name and provide the email address you plan to receive and send messages from.

Northeast Sheep & Goat Marketing Program at Cornell University. Contact tatiana Stanton, 607-254-6024. Web site: www.sheepgoatmarketing.info .

Empire State Meat Goat Producers Association. Resources include the Meat Goat Educational Packet for New Owners. Web site: www.esmgpa.org .

MPWV Meat Goat Producers Association. Contact Dick Dixon, 304-825-6421.
Web site: www.meatgoat.biz

Sustainable Goat Production: Meat Goats, ATTRA National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, 800-346-9140 or on the web at: <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/meatgoat.html>

Agricultural Alternatives: Meat Goats, Publication Number UA340, Publications Distribution Center, Penn State Univ., 814-865-6713 or on the web at: <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/ua340.html>