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Coombs Farm: Planning and Preparedness

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Coombs farm is located in Fremont, NH. Karen and Phil Coombs own 16 acres, and lease 60 additional acres.

Farmers

Phil and Karen originally started farming in upstate New York in 2008, after finishing military careers. They recently moved back to New Hampshire, where Phil grew up. Although their business is still in its starting phases, farming runs in Phil's family; for generations his family ran a hatchery. While Phil focuses on the business, Karen works a fulltime job off the farm.

Production

Coombs farm specializes in meat and wool from Icelandic sheep, pork products, honey, and maple syrup. Phil and Karen currently have 78 sheep, 19 pigs, 5 goats, and 1 cow. During sugaring season, they tap about 250 maple trees in the area.

Most of their business comes from farmers markets; they also have a buyer who distributes to restaurants. Some products are sold out of their house on the farm. Honey is currently the most profitable product, although Phil and Karen plan to target more restaurants and chefs with the Icelandic lamb meat.

Practices

The Icelandic Sheep are grass fed, and the pigs are pasture raised. Coombs farm is in the process of obtaining American Grassfed certification for the lambs, and Animal Welfare Approved certification for all of the animals.

Icelandic Sheep are tri-purpose. They can be used for milk, wool, and meat.

Climate Impacts Seen

Phil has noticed that winters definitely seem to be warmer than he remembers growing up. He says that 2013 was more of a typical New Hampshire winter. Climate data for Southern New Hampshire shows that over the past four decades average winter temperatures have increased more than any other season.[1] Have warmer winters been negatively affecting Phil and Karen's farming? Not really. "Weather is just something you have to deal with," says Phil, whose day doesn't start before looking at the forecast. "Weather in New England has always been erratic. You don't like the weather? Stick around a bit." For Phil and Karen, being prepared for variable weather is part of farming, and part of planning.

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Response

Phil and Karen are always prepared for any number of weather events, including heat and cold, drought, and rain. They focus on day-to-day farming challenges, but also always plan at least 6 months ahead.

For example, Icelandic sheep are very cold resistant, which is one of the reasons that they starting raising this breed. Heat stroke from hot summer days is a potential problem, but Karen and Phil work with the sheep to avoid this. They make sure the sheep always have shade and plenty of water. They feed them in the shade so the animals know where to find the cooler areas. They also have a small pasture that the sheep are very familiar with. The farmers say this area feels like "home" to the animals because they know it well. On very hot days, they keep the animals in this space to help them relax; they waste less energy wandering around and learning boundaries. Phil and Karen say that they haven't yet experienced any problems with sheep developing heat stress.

They also plan their grazing practices to avoid problems from large pest populations. Worms are a big issue for sheep farmers, in particular the barber pole worm. Barber pole worms are parasites that thrive in warm, humid summer environments, and can kill sheep if unchecked.[2] Parasite control is one of the reasons that Coombs farm practices rotational grazing, a system of periodically moving the animals to fresh pasture. Rotational grazing not only encourages regeneration of forage in previously grazed areas,[3] but also reduces the spread of parasites. The idea is that the sheep drop the parasites, which die out before the animals go back on the same plot of land. Making sure the grass is longer helps control infection; short grass for grazing means the sheep ingest more worms. Inter-grazing with other animals is key to this method. The worms don't affect the pigs or the cow, so that also helps control populations. Phil and Karen say that they deworm twice a year, but guess that without rotation they would have to deworm as often as once a month. Heavy use of de-wormers would also bring the risk of breeding resistant parasite populations.

Rotational grazing has other benefits as well. Karen and Phil want to farm on the same land for many years, especially the acres that they own. They are planning their practices to ensure long-term healthy soil and quality forage for the animals. They usually rotate the pigs through a pasture that they want to turn up and fertilize. After the pigs leave, they plant. This year they are planting a mix of ladino clover and orchard grass, which will hopefully be a good hay mix. They chose the mix based on their soil type. "We have a lot of land in rehab," says Phil, meaning that they are trying to improve soil health. "This [rotation] is our method."

Coombs Farm is one of over 3,500 farms in New England that report sheep and lambs as part of their inventory.[2] In New Hampshire, there are over 600 farms with sheep; about 70 of those farms are raising them at a similar scale to Coombs farm.[4] Raising lamb and producing wool are two sectors of New Hampshire agriculture that have shown slow growth since 2007.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges facing Coombs farm is simply making it a viable business. "We are getting there," says Phil, but notes that there is a steep learning curve. Phil and Karen had to learn to do a lot of things themselves, such as castrating pigs, because it wasn't cost effective to pay someone to come to the farm. They explain that it is sometimes difficult to know what all of the costs are, and have seen many other farmers who simply do not know their costs or what is profitable. "For example, if you sell a lamb, the price has to cover not only getting that lamb to market, but also the cost of any ewes that didn't give birth that year, the cost of dog food for the guard dog, and more." Things that a lot of farmers don't think about when they set prices, says Phil. Knowing your infrastructure is also important; for example the layout of fences determines the time you spend moving animals around. More time and labor means higher costs.

Karen was getting her MBA while developing their farm business plan, so a lot of research and planning went into their operation. Many farms do not have that, says Karen, and managing cash flow is especially difficult for farmers. "Cash flow changes a lot," she says. When all of the animals go to butcher,

there is a huge influx of cash. However, that has to last all year. Because a lot of farmers do not know their cash flow, or what aspects of the business are profitable, they don't know how to talk to investors to get a loan.

A particular challenge right now for Karen and Phil is accessing restaurant markets for the Icelandic lambs. Part of the challenge is that Coombs Farm is a smaller operation, and cannot supply the quantity of meat needed by these markets. Karen says it would be great to have a bigger network of sheep farmers, who could group together to sell at a larger scale. They are still trying to meet people and make more connections. "Networking is huge."

Strong networks

Phil describes how the beekeeping community is the ideal example of a strong network. "There is a beekeeping club that meets regularly and shares ideas, information, techniques." They don't view newcomers as unwanted competition; rather all are happy have more, and there is never too much honey going around. "That's the model that I see more agriculture should be aiming for," says Phil.

Karen and Phil also relied heavily upon experienced mentors when they were starting sheep in New York. This helped them learn how to take care of the lambs, diagnose problems, and respond to emergencies. They see this type of network as lacking in New Hampshire, at least with sheep farmers, and they would love to see this improve.

Maple syrup provides a great spring income for Coombs Farm.

Because all of the pigs are pasture raised, Phil and Karen carefully breed for good mothers who will care for their piglets.

Recommendations

"Talk to other farmers!" says Karen. "Visit other farms. Come visit us!" She cannot stress enough the importance of networking as the key to being resilient. One vital part of the network for animal farmers is a good vet. Karen and Phil have a great vet, who is always willing to teach them when they are interested in learning (Phil likes to watch operations). That has made a huge difference to the success of their business. According to Karen and Phil, it is definitely worth spending time to find a good vet.

It is also important to know where you are profitable. "You can't do 100 things well," says Phil, which is why they specialize in just a few systems. One of the reasons that Coombs Farm doesn't run a CSA is that they know they can't be profitable on the wider variety of products that would be needed to fill shares. "We only focus on what we know we can do well. Otherwise we think it is not worth it."

Needs and Opportunities

Karen and Phil identified a couple of areas that they see as opportunities to help support farms such as theirs.

• More free Extension classes. Karen and Phil have been looking for an artificial insemination class, for example, but have not been able to find one.

• An organized network or channel, perhaps through Extension, for meat growers to connect with chefs and restaurant owners

Resources

• Phil and Karen found Cornell Cooperative Extension very helpful when they were living in New York: http://www.cce.cornell.edu/Pages/Default.aspx

• Farm to Institution is a regional collaborative to help get New England food into New England institutions: http://www.farmtoinstitution.org

• The Community Loan Fund Farm Food Initiative helps connect investors with food and agriculture businesses: https://www.communityloanfund.org/how-we-help/business/how-we-can-help-you/farm-food

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Find more about Coombs farm at www.coombsfarm.com

Climate Change and the New England Food System Case Study Series

This case study was researched and written by UNHSI's 2014 Thomas W. Haas Climate Fellow, Ruby Woodside. Ruby's fellowship focused on documenting and communicating climate impacts and adaptation strategies for New England farmers and fishermen. Ruby is currently working on a Masters of Environmental Science and Policy as well as an MBA in Sustainability at Clark University. The fellowship is based at the UNH Sustainability Institute, and hosted in collaboration with Food Solutions New England (FSNE). FSNE is a regional, collaborative network organized around a single goal: to transform the New England food system into a resilient driver of healthy food, sustainable farming and fishing, and thriving communities. Learn more at www.foodsolutionsne.org.

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