

Producer Case Study: John Wallace of Olive Branch Goats



This case study highlights one of the farmers featured in our workshop series The Cycle of a Goat Milk or Meat Operation. Visit cfra.org for more information.



Location: Palmyra, Nebraska



Goats: Owns approximately 20 head of production does. Hopes to expand to 100+ when he moves to bigger location in a different county.



Grazing land: Owns 65+ acres split between two locations. Rents unused land from neighbors.

John was born into a farming family. He took a break for a few years during his time with the military, but farming has always been an interest.

He appreciates farming because it is both challenging and rewarding.

“ I grew up on a sheep ranch and got a dairy goat as a 4-H project when I was 8 years old. I have always had a preference for small ruminants (sheep and goats) and will eventually add sheep and cattle to my operation.

I started with goats because of lower predation risk and a slight preference over sheep.

-John ”



Markets for selling

John evaluates price trends at different outlets including the Palmyra Livestock Market, Sutton Livestock, JCC Livestock & Sales, as well as some bulk/order buyers that he has contracts with.

He watches overall trends using U.S. Department of Agriculture market reports. Price differences are weighed against the cost of transport to different locations. Sometimes, the increased transport costs are worthwhile due to number of head being sold.

Bottle kids are generally sold privately and quickly. Labor and milk replacer inputs are too high to justify artificial rearing when the animals can fetch very healthy prices off the mother.



I recently leaned into more direct-to-consumer sales with limited success. Marketing inputs involved in attracting those customers is non-trivial.

I've also had some trouble with non first-generation immigrants being unable or unwilling to slaughter their own animals after purchase, excluding themselves as potential customers.

-John ”



CENTER for RURAL AFFAIRS

cfra.org | info@cfra.org | 402.687.2100



How to get the word out

John makes an effort to get to know the order-buyers at auctions, as working with them directly can save commission and yardage charges from the sale barn.

For direct-to-consumer marketing, he has created a website and Google maps listing, as well as dropped off business cards at ethnic food stores in Lincoln, Nebraska.



Farmer neighbors

There is very little serious animal agriculture around John.

Most of the households near him are occupied by people who live on acreages but do not participate in agriculture, keeping livestock as pets or as show stock.

Most serious commercial farming around John is row-cropping. Generally speaking, they are friendly and helpful if he asks. Some serious farmers will dismiss anyone with goats as “just a hobby” due to a lack of understanding of the modern market.

Mentorship



“ I would suggest finding a mentor with at least 10 years experience. I come from a multi-generational animal agricultural background. Both of my parents have postgraduate degrees in animal ag-related fields and are very knowledgeable and skilled.

I also follow several farms and ranches on social media, and make it a point to be active in organizations that serve as knowledge and experience-sharing venues, such as the Nebraska Sheep and Goat Producers Association.

-John ”

Seasonal market for goats

The goat market is highly seasonal. A peak in market prices predictably happens in March of every year, and a low occurs in September/October. Holding out for those prices is often not worth it due to feed costs.

“ *I have access to relatively inexpensive feed in the fall and early winter in the form of row crop residue. I now keep kid crops (that were weaned in early September) until Feb. 1 to hit that early peak market.* ”
-John

Land access

During the winter, John started moving snow for neighbors. In return, they allow him to use their unused land for goat grazing.

John watches real estate listings closely for land ownership opportunities. He has paid in cash for land, or has obtained a loan through Farm Credit Services.

He owns just 5 acres at his current location, making land use a priority. Every square foot used for driveway, hay storage, or a building is one less square foot of pasture. The cost of land in John’s area is prohibitive to expansion.

Risk mitigation

“ *I have a personal doctrine of not making rigid plans, but instead ensuring options are available. Those options become contingencies and allow us to be flexible to reality.*

For example: If we are experiencing a drought, I have the option of selling kids early, grazing our other property, irrigating select pastures, utilizing hay reserves, etc.

”
-John

Advice for beginners

“ *If you don’t have a background in animal agriculture, it will be very tough. I suggest working for someone else to get some experience before risking your own capital.*

Don’t buy or breed goats unless you are ready to watch them die. If you’re not comfortable with that, this is not the line of work for you.

Don’t let this be your only source of income. Keep your day job. ”
-John

