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Production Alternatives for Small Acreages

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A majority of recently added Noble Foundation cooperators (consultation clients) are new to agriculture and/or have relatively small landholdings.

Most of these cooperators are either retired or have a full-time job off the farm. The main purpose of their agricultural involvement is to maintain the "agriculture use tax valuation" on their property (Texas), to pay the taxes or perhaps even show a profit. Depending on the size of the farm, a cattle operation of any kind may not be ideal and could lead to overuse of resources in an effort to maximize beef production. So what other livestock enterprises are available for small acreage landowners? One possible answer may be meat goats and/or hair sheep.

The use of Spanish goats for brush control has been in practice for decades in the Edwards Plateau region of Texas. If you have a small acreage and an infestation of woody plants, meat goats may be an option to get brush under control. Regardless of the forages available on any particular property, goats are very adaptable and can subsist on a grass-based diet. The meat goat industry changed

drastically in the early to mid-1990s when the South American Boer goat was introduced to the United States. Other breeds of meat goats include Kiko, Myotonic and Pygmy. Meat goats are fairly well established throughout the Southern Great Plains as they have been embraced by 4-H and FFA for use as show animals.

Hair sheep became popular with sheep producers after the elimination of wool and mohair subsidies in 1995. Producing wool-bearing sheep without government payments for the wool became a breakeven venture, at best. Today, it is difficult to even locate a commercial sheep shearer in the region. The two pure breeds of hair sheep are the Barbados and the St. Croix. The other three major breeds, Dorper/White Dorper, Katahdin and the Royal White, are composite breeds as they all have some percentage of wool-bearing breeds in their ancestry. As a result, these composite breeds do not shed their wool as well as the two pure breeds.

Demand for the meat of small ruminants is on the rise. Most of the supply is currently imported from Australia and New Zealand. Producers in the U.S. have an opportunity to capitalize on this demand for sheep and goat meat. If marketed at the right time and place, sheep and goat

producers can receive about \$2 per pound of live weight sold. There are also opportunities for direct sales of these animals from the farm.

For every cow that your place could run, you could run five ewes or does instead. With a gestation period of 150 days, you could get two lamb or kid crops per year, although three crops per 24-month period is more likely with a continuous breeding system. Twins are the norm and triplets are not uncommon. For those five ewes or does, you could expect to raise 10 lambs or kids per crop. Marketed at 50-60 pounds during the peak season, these young animals could gross \$100-\$120 per head.

Raising sheep and goats has its challenges. Fencing is a big concern as cattle fences will not hold sheep or goats. There is a significant upfront cost associated with building the right kind of fence for these animals. Predation is also a problem. No goat or sheep producer should ever be without a good guard animal (dog, donkey or llama). Internal parasites are also a big problem. There are dewormers available, but some parasites are becoming resistant to these commercial drugs. Hair sheep seem to be more tolerant of internal parasites than meat goats. Finally, these animals need some shelter from the ►

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weather, but require nothing fancy. Although a little work is involved on the front end, raising hair sheep or meat goats may be the ideal enterprise to best utilize a small acreage. ■