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◆ Ranching
tourism adds
to bottom
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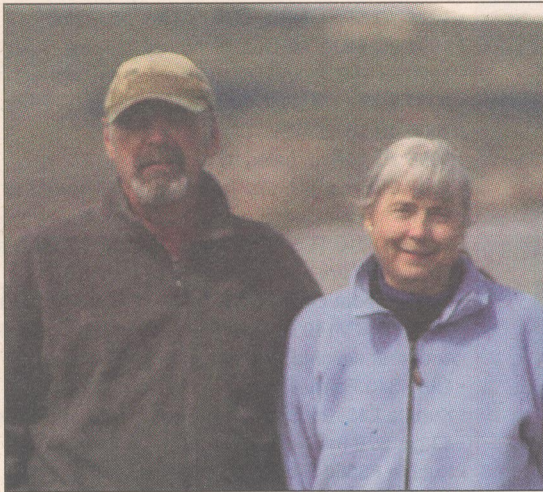
Photo by Jan Murawski Evan

Raising goats is labor intensive — nannies often lose their kids or refuse to nurture them plus goats are hard to keep fenced in. On the plus side, goats complement cattle in a rotational grazing system.

From ranch cowboy to goat herder

Photo by Jan Murawski
Evans

Steve and Nancy Oswald have developed a solar harvesting ranch where they use the energy from the sun through the green plants to feed their cattle and goats.



Should a cowboy change his chaps?

By Jan Murawski Evans,
Contributor

At the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in western Fremont County, rancher Steve Oswald turned some neighbors' heads when he brought 200 goats home in 1999. Although he and his wife, Nancy, had leased her family's Taylor Ranch since 1991, the ranch had weed and brush problems that dated back over 30 years.

The ranch with its land leases covers 10,000 acres that was divided into two grazing grounds for winter

and summer before the Oswalds took over. Because goats are opposite grazers of cattle, Oswald thought they would complement the cattle's grass grazing habitat. Cattle graze grass 80 percent of the time with the remaining 20 percent browsing on forbs and brush while goats spend 80 percent of their feeding on forbs and brush and only 20 percent on grass. The goats would help to eliminate or at least lessen the noxious weed population while clearing the lower branches of scrub oak and piñon pines to expand the cattle's grass grazing.

The mountainous terrain of some areas of the ranch seemed perfect for the nimble goats. Goats, however, are not just athletic when it comes to climbing rocky rills for forage. They are also adept at escaping from most fencing that keeps cattle safely contained. Oswald had successfully used single electric wire fence for temporary pastures for the cattle. His original plan was to keep the goats and cattle together for intensive grazing on rotational pastures. The goats' disrespect for his fences foiled his plan from the beginning.

So after experimenting with several fence systems he finally discovered a fence that would keep goats and cattle where he wanted and

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Sustainable agriculture is creating a better environment

that would not be broken by the native deer and elk that traversed through his pastures. The answer was electric high tensile four wire fence installed on fiberglass posts using t-posts in the corners.

Until the entire ranch is cross fenced in this manner, management of the goats is labor intensive herding. When the Oswalds got the goats they knew they needed protection for the animals so they obtained six Pyrenees Anatole cross guard dogs that live with the goats to protect them from predators.

The goat meat market is a market based on ethnic holidays. It's a growing market because availability is lower than demand. Oswald bred his goats for a November harvest this year. The nannies produced about 200 kids, but the unusually cold weather this spring resulted in higher than average losses. Later kidding could eliminate that weather related problem and taking the finished animals to the Texas market in January could result in higher yields. Optimum weight for goats at harvest is "bingo 8" or 60 pounds.

Before Oswald invested in goats, he changed his beef operation. His cattle were naturally raised in large pastures, so the switch from sending his steers to market to be fattened to finishing the beef on grass was not difficult. In 1998 he sold his haying equipment because he was convinced that the cattle would thrive on the standing grass. If there is total snow cover, he'll feed hay until the snow melts. Because the winter pastures are at lower altitudes, the snow usually melts off quickly, and the cattle can graze.

The change in his cow/calf operation started in 1995 when he attended the "Ranching for Profit" school taught by Stan Parsons. Parsons presented ranch economics in an understandable format. Since that experience Oswald runs his ranch as a business for profit. Ranchers are excellent at animal husbandry and mechanics, but often their time is so full of day to day chores that they

business. His time in the machine shed was almost eliminated with only one tractor to maintain.

The switch to direct marketing his grass fed natural beef meant he became a "price maker" versus what he had been when he sold his beef as a commodity and was a "price taker." He had control over the price he was willing to accept for his product. The new product meant that if an animal had to be treated with antibiotics, he sold it out of the herd. He culled cows that were dependent on chemical wormers. In doing so, he built a herd that is adapted to the climate and elevation and healthy enough to fight off parasites and disease. The animals are still vaccinated as calves against cattle diseases.

Because he calves in June when the weather is more amenable to young animals, his steers are usually harvested as two year olds. If the winter is especially difficult it gives the steers time on spring grass to fatten. The June calving is also beneficial to the cows on native pasture because even if they lose some weight over the winter, their unborn calves will benefit from the spring grass.

Oswald sold his first grass fat beef to a friend six years ago. "Like selling something to your mother," says Nancy. Last year they sold all 30 head that were available.

Steers fattened on grass require different handling after slaughter. The meat is hung for 21 days to age. Corn fed beef shouldn't be aged so

long because of the higher incidence of mold and the danger of E.coli bacteria growth. Since the local plant's policy was not to hang beef for the required time, Oswald had to find a meat packing company that would age the beef for optimum texture and flavor. He found a company in Elizabeth, Colo., that would handle the beef properly.

The Oswalds direct market their grass fed natural beef. From their website: www.backcountrybeef.com to local newspaper classified ads, they have had more demand than they can supply. The health food store, Back to Basics, in Colorado Springs carries their beef and expands their direct market of larger quantities after people buy individual cuts. Word of mouth from customers and friends and family is also a viable direct marketing tool.

Although Steve still is no great fan of goats, he recognizes their contribution to the health of the ranchland. The animals' apparent lack of mothering instincts can be quite frustrating after years of dealing with cows who take good care of their calves. There are many more bottle kids than calves because the nannies just walk off and leave their young even though the animals are penned during kidding. These babies are sold to ranches that have facilities to care for the orphan kids.

With the expansion of fencing suitable for goats and cattle, Oswald Cattle Ranch will soon be a model of intensive grazing practices that mimics the vast herds of bison that

moved through the grasslands. The goats will improve the native grass and plant population by eliminating noxious weeds and clearing brush while the cattle produce healthy meat for local people.

Sustainable agriculture creates a better environment

for native species, both predator and prey, by keeping the land healthy and harvesting the solar energy through the green plant material. When ranchers can make a living using the earth's resources in a win-win-win situation, there is no downside to agriculture.

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