GREAT POTENTIAL

In a New Industry

by Rick Machen

While browsing through a livestock industry publication recently, I thought of an unusual ad. I thought it should occupy a single column and be tucked inconspicuously amidst the help wanted section three pages inside the back cover. It should read:

Wanted:

Person or persons to provide leadership for a lean red meat producing industry. Must have a vision for the future and ability to give or provide focus to an industry which has tremendous enthusiasm, yet lacks a sense of direction. Person(s) must be an energetic, goal-oriented team player and a futuristic thinker not bound by tradition. Untiring, positive attitude preferred; excellent people skills a must. For further information, contact your nearest meat goat producer.

Never before has there been such interest and enthusiasm within the U.S. meat goat industry. Never before has the need for production goals and unified direction been greater. Interest and excitement in the industry have primarily been spurred by one event - the introduction of the Boer goat. Introduction of new breeds is always exciting. In the short term, the lucrative market values resulting from high demands on a limited supply stimulate interest. However, the true worth (long-term) of any breed is not established until significant contributions to commodity (i.e. lean meat) production are made.

What then, are some of the possible contributions the Boer goat will make toward the long-term viability of the meat goat industry? The following is a brief discussion of some of the Boer goat's unique attributes.

Muscle mass - Although little (none of U.S. origin) carcass data is available to support this claim, observation of the goats and comparison to typical domestic meat goats leads one to conclude that the Boer goat is a more muscular breed of goat. More muscle mass translates into greater body weight. If the marketing structure ever changes from a by the head to a per pound of body weight basis., heavier muscled slaughter goats will have a high market value.

Heavier muscling may also provide opportunities for implementation of different carcass fabrications and diversification of the size and type of goat meat products offered to the retail consumer.

Body capacity and mass - Beef cattle, sheep and swine breeders prove that substance of bone, structural correctness of feet and legs, spring of rib, depth of side and chest floor width are essential components in the development of a functional, productive, meat-producing animal. Of the breeds available to U.S. breeders, the Boer is most likely to contribute body capacity and mass.

In addition, the Boer appears to have a larger rumen volume (gut fill) than most domestic goats. In terms of lean meat produced per unit of input, goats cannot compete with the other red meat production species on grasslands, improved pastures or on concentrate feeds. However, on native range with substantial quantities of palatable browse, goats have a competitive advantage and are most efficient in the conversion of brows to muscle protein. The Boer's possible contribution of additional gut fill could result in enhanced forage (browse) intake and improved performance.

Appetite - By nature, goats are somewhat seasonal breeders; breeding Sept.- Nov. and kidding Feb-May, and unlike beef, pork and lamb, the goat industry has never developed a "Feedlot" phase. One reason for the absence of an intensive feeding phase is the goat's poorer appetite and relatively inefficient conversion of feed to body weight. Producer observations will substantiate the claim that Boer goats have a greater appetite than other breeds. This may enable the meat goat industry to produce a more continuous supply of goat meat. While fattening goats in a feedlot is certainly not advocated here, some "time on feed" may eventually be required to support a continuous supply of goat meat. If so, the Boer goat's apparent ability to influence the feeding behavior may prove beneficial.

Maternal ability - In South Africa, the Boer doe exhibits strong maternal instincts and admirable flocking behavior, is prolific and has a relatively long breeding season - traits that warrant consideration and inclusion in the development of an American meat goat.

Boer does also have excellent udder conformation. Dairy breeds are making a significant contribution to the mature size of the meat goat population, but at the same time they may shorten the longevity of many crossbred does, due to udder unsoundness. The effect the Boer can have on maternal characteristics remains unseen.

A word of caution deserves inclusion here. Currently, meat goats are

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at the same stage of development as the beef cattle industry of 1960. In the fifteen plus years following 1960, new breeds of cattle were imported into the U.S. - breeds with heavier muscle, larger mature size and greater milk production potential. Bigger was better, so cattlemen spent twenty years building better cattle with little consideration of consumer concerns or environmental constraints. In the late 1980s the beef industry realized the need for consumer input and the identification of production targets. A certain production target was created and many cattle didn't achieve the objective. Moderation, predictability and consistency are now the beef industry's focal points. So how is this related to Boer goats and the meat goat industry?

Considering the breeds available, the potential exists to develop a meat goat that is too big and too productive for the environment in which it has a competitive advantage. Therefore, it is imperative that breeders first identify a production system appropriate for their environment, then develop a goat that can efficiently perform therein.

Positive impacts on growth and phenotypic characteristics are substantiated by breeder observations and limited research data. Data collected, on 1/2 bloods born in Spring of 1994, indicates individual 90 day weaning weights in excess of 36kg are possible. Marketable production does can exceed 68 kg by 90 days postpartum. Preliminary results from a Texas A&M study comparing Spanish goats to 1/2 Boer, 1/2 Spanish kids indicates inclusion of the Boer positively affected the growth rate, particularly in the postweaning phase.

Spring of 1995 will offer American breeders an opportunity to begin assessing the impact of the Boer on meat goat production. In addition to the purebred kids, significant numbers of 1/4, 1/2 and 3/4 blood offspring will be available for evaluation.

The industry needs a production target - a goal at which to aim - a clear direction towards success. For the bulk of the industry, long term viability may hinge on breeders' ability to develop a prolific, fast-growing animal with desirable carcass characteristic that can be sustained and productive on a browse diet. The Boer goat can play a significant role in that process.

The meat goat industry is searching for leadership and direction. Someone once said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Boer goats have captured the industry spotlight and currently hold everyone's attention. Perhaps the time is right for their breeders to step forward in answer to the WANTED ad.

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