

Lamb rush

By LEN RICHARDSON

MCCORMACK Ranch, where the “2+2=Rebuild: Let’s Grow” initiative was announced, was established by Dan McCormack in 1896 and is now run by his granddaughter Jeanne McCormack and her husband, Al Medvitz. Jeanne and Al continue the commitment to sustainable farming established by Jeanne’s grandfather over a century ago — the animals are pasture-fed and free-range; given no antibiotics or hormones; and handled using low-stress, humane methods.

McCormack Ranch consists of 3,700 acres and lies in the historic Montezuma Hills, along the Sacramento River. The ranch produces dryland wheat and barley in rotation with grass-fed sheep and grass-fed Boer goats.

The ranch was the first to supply lamb to Niman Ranch, and has sold lambs there since 1992.

Extraordinary demand

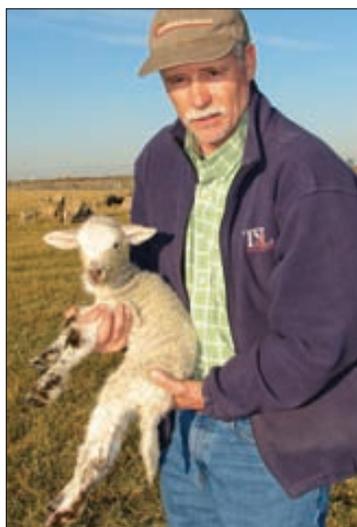
From the farm gate to the lamb and wool processing, there is a shared concern about meeting the demand for lamb and wool production. Lamb processors are clamoring for a greater supply of lamb.

In 2011, Kroger, one of the nation’s largest grocery chains, launched an American lamb-branded campaign, and Walmart made a commitment to carry exclusively American lamb. And non-traditional channels, like on-farm sales, farmers markets and small processors serving ethnic communities, have grown exponentially. In fact, one-third of the U.S. lamb crop has moved outside the traditional infrastructure.

What’s more, U.S. lamb exports have soared 113% in volume over September 2010, and the value has jumped 83.9%. Margaret Soulen Hansen, Idaho, American Sheep Industry Association, or ASI, presi-

Key Points

- The “Let’s Grow” initiative was introduced at historic McCormack Ranch.
- The benefits of sheep include being able to clean up alfalfa fields in the fall.
- Grazing along the levees reduces the chances of herbicide contamination.



LAMB CHECK: Yolo County sheep producer Bruce Rominger checks on a lamb.

dent, explains that traditional export markets like Australia and New Zealand have experienced cutbacks. “Australia experienced a severe drought, and New Zealand has switched to dairy production.”

California opportunity

California is already the No. 2 sheep state behind Texas, and with the Let’s Grow push, could become No. 1. California and Arizona



HISTORIC SHEEP RANCH: Al Medvitz and his wife, Jeanne McCormack, operate McCormack Ranch, which consists of 3,700 acres and lies in the historic Montezuma Hills along the Sacramento River. The ranch produces dryland wheat and barley in rotation with grass-fed sheep and grass-fed Boer goats. The ranch was established by Dan McCormack in 1896, and is now run by his granddaughter Jeanne, and her husband, Al.



YOUTHFUL START: John Rominger, 6, pets a lamb on his family’s Yolo County sheep ranch.

could, with Arizona’s sheep numbers, move close to challenging Texas. Arizona ranks second in the number of sheep farms.

“The benefits of having sheep include being able to clean up alfalfa fields in the fall after the last cutting and, in the case of organic alfalfa, to graze it in the early spring to prevent weed and weevil problems, says Bruce Rominger, Winters. “We also use the sheep to graze other crop residues in the summer, which turns some of the residues into manure and thus makes the groundwork for the next crop easier and cheaper.

“The sheep market is good right now, but we have no idea how long it will last. We are hoping the other benefits of having sheep in our operation will help take us through any downturn in the market, which will inevitably occur,” he says.

“The key is the tremendous market opportunities available to us,” says Wes Patton, Orland, who became a full-time sheep producer with his wife, Jane, when he retired from Chico State University.

“Nearly every ethnic group in the state eats lamb; plus, the white-tablecloth restaurant like lamb, and the popularity of farmers markets make it a great place to market,” Wes Patton explains.

The Pattons have diversified by selling lamb to country buyers, Superior Farms and farmers market vendors. “Marketing terminology like ‘Shake the Hand that Feeds You’ is important, and they want to see who is producing the product,” he says.

The Pattons are in the midst of a new project with their sheep, teaming up with Sierra Nevada Brewery in Chico. The brewery, which has an organic hops yard, was looking for a way to clean the undergrowth of the hop vines while maintaining their organic certification, and sheep were the answer. His next goal is to get lamb on the menu at the brewery.

State advantages

California lamb’s unique tenderness, taste and leanness are attributed to favorable year-round growing conditions. Early and mild spring weather generates a wide variety of high-protein feeds as well as a healthy environment to bring lambs to market directly after weaning and reduce the stress to both lambs and ewes.

California’s diverse geography allows ranchers to use the best feeds available. Lower-elevation valley operations use lush alfalfa hay in the fall, moving to foothill pastures in the spring. In the summer, sheep are transported to the high mountain ranges for rich forage. Lambs also graze on protein-rich clover in irrigated pastures.

Other advantages listed by growers:
■ Grazing along the levees accompanying the Central Valley waterways reduces the chances of herbicide contamination in the water by making it unnecessary for farmers to spray herbicides.

■ Because sheep graze on residue foliage, it takes less time to prepare the land for the next crop. Reduced weeds yield lush alfalfa with no dry matter in the fresh-cut hay, making feed more nutritious. Additionally, the crops and land benefit from the natural fertilizer generated by the sheep.

News Briefs

USDA speeding up food labeling with rule

The USDA proposed a rule that would allow food manufacturers to use new or modified labels without first submitting them to the Food Safety and Inspection Service, reports *Food Business Review*. The label would still have to follow FSIS guidelines, but the rule would help manufacturers get products to market faster.

Horse slaughter next?

Horses could be butchered in the U.S. for human consumption after Congress quietly lifted a 5-year-old ban on funding horse meat inspections; activists say slaughterhouses could be open in a month. Congress lifted the ban in a bill President Barack Obama signed into law to keep the government afloat until mid-December.