

Imported Genetics Spur Sheep Milk Production

In an age when dairy farmers are taking an extreme financial hit and avoiding expansion, business partners Shirley Knox, Mariana Marques de Almeida, and Jeff Wideman are doing exactly the opposite. The Monroeville, Wis. trio are establishing the first U.S. Assaf sheep flock focused on milk production.

The key to their \$2 million dream is using imported genetics to grow a flock of 1,500 Assaf sheep that are known for outstanding milk production. The Assaf breed, which is extremely rare in the U.S., originated in Israel at the Volcani Research Center in the 1950's. Animals were exported to Spain several times between 1977 and the 1990's. Spanish breeders then implemented a genetic improvement program that the Wisconsin trio have tapped into by purchasing frozen Assaf semen. That initial purchase yielded several hundred baby lambs by spring 2018, with more births expected in the next 18 months.

Knox says their goal is to establish a flock of milking ewes by 2019 on a former dairy farm near Juda, Wis. where Wideman grew up. In addition to purchasing the genetics' the business also built new facilities to house the ewes, lambs and a 72-stall milking parlor.

To raise their animals, Wideman and Knox teamed with Marques de Almeida, a Portuguese animal scientist and specialist in Assaf sheep, who they knew from world cheese competitions. Together the group formed Ms. J and Co., which represents the initials of the three founders, in 2015.

There's a big demand for sheep milk in Wisconsin and the group will be selling to milk cheese plants that are already producing sheep milk cheeses. Wideman says sheep milk cheeses have unique flavors that consumers really enjoy. John Umhoefer, executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese Maker's Association, agrees, and says that sheep milk cheese has enormous potential as a niche market not only in Wisconsin, but



Photo by John Hart

Three Wisconsin business partners have established the first Assaf sheep flock in the U.S., focusing on the breed's high milk production.

across the country.

Although Wisconsin has only about 2,500 sheep being milked on a dozen farms in 2018, that number is bound to grow. Marques de Almeida has moved to Wisconsin and is using her sheep genetics expertise to not only build their herd, but provide training for other small ruminant dairy farmers who want to enter the industry. The Wisconsin Sheep Dairy Association, formed in 2016,

received a \$38,000 grant from the State to promote the sheep milk industry. Wideman says he foresees other Assaf farms being established in the Juda area so it can become the hub of sheep milk production for the state.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Ms. J and Co. (www.msjandro.com; mariana@msjandro.com).

World's Smallest Sheep Now In U.S.

Rams under 2 ft. tall and ewes even smaller are the goal of Karen Seo. She is slowly upbreeding a small herd of Ouessant sheep, native to an island off the west coast of France.

"About 10 years ago I thought it would be fun to raise livestock, but since I had less than an acre at the time, I looked for a small breed," says Seo. "I found the Ouessant, and for the past 10 years I've been using imported semen to develop the breed here."

Purebred Ouessant are small, with rams only 18 to 20 in. tall and 33 to 48 lbs. Ewes run 17 to 18 in. tall and only 28 to 35 lbs. This is half the size of Shetlands and a fraction of the size of the largest sheep breeds.

For 2 years she and her partner, the late Ray Tomlinson, used Ouessant semen secured from a British breeder. Initially they worked with an Oregon sheep breeder and Shetland ewes. Half blood female offspring were then selected and bred with the semen.

Seo and Tomlinson realized they needed more space for their sheep and purchased

just under 4 acres of land near their day jobs in the Boston area. They moved the half blood ewes from Oregon and continued artificial insemination. Lower percentage ewes were sold off as the percent Ouessant increased in each new generation.

Today her breeding flock of 28 ewes and 17 yearlings are mostly 7/8 and 15/16 Ouessant. Unfortunately, she ran out of semen in the fall of 2016.

Shortly after the first importations in 2008 and 2010, the USDA put a stop to further imports due to an outbreak of Schmallenberg virus in Europe. Seo has since been working with the USDA and breeders in England and Germany to get access to more semen. In the meantime, she has been crossing with her own high percentage Ouessant cross rams and selecting for size and confirmation.

"Our 7/8 blood ewes are averaging about 52 lbs., and the 15/16 are about the same," says Seo. "I thought they would have been smaller by now, but the Shetland genetics are still there."

Seo sells fleece, ram lambs for meat and



Purebred Ouessant sheep are small, with rams only 18 to 20 in. tall and weighing just 33 to 48 lbs. Karen Seo is using imported semen to develop the breed in the U.S.

older culled females for mutton. The 2-lb. fleeces are popular with spinners and bring about \$20 a pound. While even the mutton is tasty and popular, the small carcasses yield only 20 to 35 lbs. hanging weight. Seo sells the lamb for \$6.50 a lb. and the mutton for \$4.

Those markets pale compared to one that Seo discovered herself. The ewe lambs are in high demand as pets, bringing from \$1,000 to \$1,200 each.

"They are delightful as pets, very intelligent, and take care of themselves well," says Seo. "The eventual market for the breed may be as pets, although they are also used for vineyard

weed control in Europe."

When she does get new semen, Seo will continue the breeding program she and Tomlinson began in 2008. At this point she is unsure where she will go with it.

"I don't know if I'll sell rams or retain control of breeding animals," says Seo. "I sold a couple of bred ewes, but I have to decide if I want to increase the flock size or have others breed them."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Karen Seo, Breton Meadow Farm, 37 Farrar Rd., Lincoln, Mass. 01773 (ph 781 259-0563; info@bretonmeadowfarm.com; www.bretonmeadowfarm.com).

New Machine Clears Ditches Fast

You can clear out silted-in ditches fast with the Ditch Doctor. No need to dig, drain, haul and spread. Second-generation drainage professional Adam Fisher first thought of the concept while working with his dad as a teenager.

"We were draining a field with a dragline, and I asked him what would happen when it filled back up," recalls Fisher. "He said that we'd dig it out the same. That didn't make sense to me. When I started my own business, I started working on a one-step prototype. As I used it, I reinvested the money earned to refine it."

A few years ago, Fisher decided his concept was ready to go commercial.

The 2,250-lb. Ditch Doctor mounts to the arm of a 13 to 22-ton excavator. A minimum of 37 gpm at 4,700 psi hydraulic system is recommended to drive the motor on the impellers.

As the operator moves the head forward through the ditch, water, silt, soil and even

small rocks are pushed back into the reach of high-speed impellers. The head has a round bottom, leaving a concave surface behind.

"The head can be submerged in up to 3 ft. of water, but the spin of the impellers will still blow material out of the chute," explains Fisher. "It can throw materials up to 120 ft. across a field in self-leveling deposits. There are no spoils piled alongside the ditch that have to be spread or hauled away."

The scroll case that holds the impellers is rugged enough that it can be used like a shovel to move material even if the impellers aren't running. Fisher has designed the head to work with multiple scroll casings and other components.

"I had interest from western Canada, where they have to deal with dry conditions," says Fisher. "I redesigned the head with removable components so it can handle either wet or dry conditions."

The Ditch Doctor has a base price of \$37,500 (Canadian) with extra scroll cases



Ditch Doctor mounts on the arm of a 13 to 22-ton excavator. Its rotary head can throw material up to 120 ft. across a field in self-leveling deposits.

priced at \$15,000 each.

The Ditch Doctor can be purchased direct from Fisher while he develops distribution networks for the machine.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Ditch

Doctor Atlantic, Ltd., 2896 Hwy #4, Glenholme, N.S. Canada B0M 1G0 (ph 902 662-2234; info@ditchdoctor.ca; www.ditchdoctor.ca).