

## He Figured Out How To Pelletize Straw

Dave Simpson says that figuring out how to pelletize straw wasn't easy but now that the process is in place, pellet markets are expanding quickly. He started Midwestern First Choice Bedding only 3 years ago. He now has customers across the country from Washington State to Puerto Rico. Pellet markets include environmental restoration, horse stalls, lawn and garden mulch, and will soon include kitty litter.

"We have a pretty good business supplying mushroom producers, too," adds Simpson. "We are also planning to launch barley straw pellets for the control of algae in ponds."

Straw has been Simpson's passion for more than 30 years. He started baling straw and selling it to local landscapers at the age of 15. That was with a tractor and baler he borrowed from a farmer he had gone to work for at the age of 13. The business grew as Simpson grew older.

"We got up to 150,000 small square bales a year," recalls Simpson.

At one point he was baling straw on 10,000 acres from northern Kentucky, across Indiana to southern Michigan and into Illinois. When he lost a major customer on a road construction job, Simpson decided to diversify. He made a million-dollar investment in pelletizing equipment from Germany.

"I thought we had the right equipment and process, but it didn't work as promised," says Simpson. "I had to figure things out for myself, make changes and find local fabricators to make parts."

It took 3 years, but Simpson feels like he is hitting his stride, and new markets are finding him.

"We had a company that cleans up environmental problems buy our pellets by the semi load," he says. "They needed to soak up the water in a pond so they could work on it."

"We dye pellets green for another customer, who spreads them when planting grass," adds Simpson. "They look green as they break down and help hold the soil as the grass gets established."

Pellets have proven popular for absorption and reduced dust at livestock shows, as well as in barns and even in the home. One customer raved about the pellets for her guinea pigs. A stable owner claimed bedding waste was reduced from 50 to as much as 75 percent. Another said when they cleaned it out of their stable, the broken-down pellets went into their compost and



**Dave Simpson uses this German-made pelletizing machine to make straw pellets for sale. Uses include everything from environmental restoration to lawn and garden mulch.**

then to their gardens.

Storage space is also reduced with the pellets. Simpson estimates that ten to fifteen 40-lb. bags can replace 25 average small square bales.

Simpson prices the pellets at \$5 per bag or \$4.75 a bag on a pallet of 50 bags. Those are direct sales from his warehouse. Due to shipping and handling costs, prices at dealers



**These potato plants were mulched with his straw pellets.**

(currently from Iowa to Pennsylvania) can run as high as \$8 to \$9 per bag.

Simpson is looking for dealers and continues to explore new markets. He needs to. The straw entrepreneur is still baling straw on 7,000 to 10,000 acres each summer. That makes a lot of pellets.

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**Jacob Murray adds value to his sheep by pelletizing belly wool, which otherwise is often discarded at shearing.**

## These Sheep Farms Pelletize Belly Wool

Pelletizing belly wool from shorn sheep adds value for producers and is a great new product for gardeners. The idea comes from Topsy Farms in Ontario, which started looking for ways to boost income from sheep. They found what they needed in Utah.

"Albert Wilde at Wild Valley Farms had the idea, and we worked out a partnership," says Jacob Murray, Topsy Farms. "We

distribute in Canada, and they distribute in the U.S."

Murray gives credit to Wilde for sharing what his family had learned on their own and in work with university researchers. The basic concept is to add value to sheep belly wool, which is often discarded at shearing.

Wilde says his wife wanted a way to reduce watering of hanging plants. When he added wool to the soil, the results



**Becky Bruns grows farm-raised shrimp in tanks until they're large enough to sell. Then she nets shrimp fresh out of the tank and flash freezes them in ice water.**

## Farm-Raised Shrimp Sell Like Hotcakes

Within days of letting people know that her first batch of Pacific white shrimp were ready for harvest in late 2019, enough customers had traveled to Becky Bruns' Danube, Minn., farm to buy her entire production. Any worries she had about marketing farm-grown shrimp in rural Minnesota were gone. And though there have been other challenges and setbacks, Bruns' niche market appears to be a good one.

"I know the demand is there for a fresh product like this," she says, noting consumers are interested in supporting farm-to-table producers.

Bruns knew she needed to try something different after Avian Influenza decimated her chickens and destroyed her egg operation in 2015. The seed was planted to raise Pacific white shrimp after purchasing them to eat from Simply Shrimp in Blomkest, Minn. Owner Paul Damhof offered to mentor Bruns, helping her set up her business, The Shrimp Shop, on her farm.

In September 2018, she started remodeling about half of the 360-ft. long poultry barn her parents built in 1980, the year Bruns was born. The propane in-floor heat helps keep the well-insulated 160 by 48-ft. space at 86 degrees year-round. PVC paneled walls with stainless steel fasteners won't rust in the warm environment with 17 tanks filled with salt water.

Chemistry is a big part of Bruns' job. Her well water goes through two filtrations to fill the tanks. Then 42-lb. boxes of marine-grade sea salt are added - 17 boxes in the 1,500-gal. nursery tanks and 30 boxes in the 3,300-gal.

were so positive, he recognized a market opportunity. Researchers at Utah State University identified nutritional value as well for what is generally considered waste wool.

"If a buyer gives the sheep producer 10¢ per pound today, we hope to at least double that," he says.

Topsy Farms has begun selling Wilde's pellets in Ontario as Sally's Garden wool pellet organic fertilizer. The 9-0-2 grade fertilizer holds up to 20 times its weight in water. It is also a good choice for mulch. As it breaks down, it slowly releases nutrients, while aerating the soil and reducing the need for watering by as much as 25 percent.

Topsy Farms sells a 1 kg (2.2-lb.) bag of pellets for \$25, enough to cover 66 sq. ft. of soil. They are experimenting with a 5 kg bag.

Wilde sells 8-oz. bags of pellets for \$10.99 and suggests that is sufficient to cover about 15 sq. ft. of soil or to incorporate with 6 gal. of soil at 1/2 cup per gallon. Wilde also sells wool pellets in 22-lb. bags for \$135 and larger amounts for wholesale customers.

Pelletizing belly wool and selling it to gardeners and landscapers is only one way that Topsy Farms and Wilde Valley Farms are adding value to their sheep. Topsy Farms sells a wide variety of wool blankets and bedding,

tanks where shrimp are raised to 20 to 25 grams.

"I get a few rotations and constantly check the water," Bruns says. Beyond maintaining and monitoring pH, alkalinity, ammonia content, and nitrate levels, each tank has bacteria from the shrimp that is necessary for their survival.

Special pelletized feed in different rations according to size is measured out every day and put on a belt timer to consistently feed the shrimp, which have digestive systems that empty every 45 minutes.

"You have to have an eye on details. Oxygen, feed and water are all important," Bruns says, noting things can still go wrong.

Despite having backups for her backups, when an air pump failed, a transfer switch failed to read it correctly and she lost 70,000 shrimp overnight.

With new stock she's hopeful to get back on track in 2021. It takes about 120 days to grow shrimp to market weight. When they are ready she posts the information on her Facebook page and social media. Customers bring coolers, and she nets shrimp fresh out of the tank and flash freezes them in ice water. She sells them for \$22/lb. with cash discounts.

"My goal is to have 200 lbs. a month (about 4,000 shrimp)," she says.

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and sheepskin products. They also offer tours and special events, as well as offering packages of lamb cuts, young and mature mutton cuts, and yearling lamb cuts from their online store.

The innovative entrepreneurs have even developed a virtual adoption program for orphan lambs that have to be bottle fed. People are invited to "adopt" a lamb for \$75. The adopter names the lamb and receives a photo of it. Pre COVID, they were invited to come to the farm and help bottle feed and cuddle with the lamb. Adoptees also get a full birthing history, lamb information and a progress report on their lamb. They don't get the actual lamb.

"We sell out every year," says Leah Murray, Topsy Farms. "It is a great way to help us cover the extra labor and cost of these lambs."

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