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Five years ago in my February 2006 column I wrote this lead-in: *Goats Wanted: 15 million healthy commercial does 1-2 years old. Will pay \$3 billion on delivery.*

That was the number of breeding does that the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that we would need to meet the growing demand for goat meat. My column was a sounding call for goat producers to increase their herds, expand operations and work toward meeting at least a portion of this demand for goat meat.

Five years later, not only have U.S. producers not increased production of meat goats, our national herd has actually shrunken 2 percent, 2,590,000 in 2008 to 2,538,000 in 2009. This reduction in goat numbers can be blamed on a variety of factors, from drought, to high costs to the general state of the economy. Regardless of the reason, the bottom line is the demand for goat meat in America is growing but ranchers are producing less.

The good news is that this shortage is pushing up the price of goats on the hoof. The highest price listed for slaughter goats in the February 2006 *Goat Rancher* market report was \$1.36 a pound. In this month's market report (Page 24) the highest price is \$2.32 a pound. Those who have maintained their herds are now reaping the rewards.

Australia, the major exporter of goat meat to the United States, is also benefiting from our domestic shortage of goat meat. Their exports to the U.S. jumped 13 percent to 14,437 tons in 2010.

While high prices should be incentive for U.S. producers to increase their numbers of breeding stock, many ranchers are choosing to ship some of their best nannies to slaughter. Drought in some parts of the country are forcing herd reductions but mismanagement and parasite problems plague other producers. All are finding immediate profit by selling their productive does to the highest bidder — and lately that has been the slaughter buyers.

I have heard two stories in the past few weeks from sale barn operators who have witnessed this trend. One barn had a load of pregnant Boer does dropped off sale; with no one else able to buy them on such short notice, the does — and their unborn crop of babies — went to the butcher.

In another case, more than 100 Kiko does went through a local sale barn. A nearby Kiko producer was contacted and was able to purchase 10 of the best for breeding stock. Again, the rest went to the slaughter house.

I understand each producer does what he has to do, but if people in these situations could just take a little extra time and get the word out that does like this are available. There is a demand for good, commercial does — and I don't mean just from slaughter buyers. I hear from many producers who are looking for quality nannies but can't find them. More effort needs to be made to link those ready to sell their does with those ready to buy. Both parties will profit more in the long run.

I have raised goats off and on for more than 20 years, raising nearly every breed of goat you can imagine. In addition to slaughter goats, I have raised Nubians, fullblood Boer show animals, Boer and Kiko breeding stock, Myotonics, show wethers and even pets. But the most consistent money maker year after year has been good, percentage Kiko doelings. No matter how many doe kids I raise, I can't raise enough. Kiko doelings that I sold just a few years ago for \$100 now bring \$200-\$300. A 2-year-old commercial crossbred Kiko doe carrying kids can bring \$400. It's a seller's market out there, we just don't have enough to sell.

In my own operation, I'm having to play catch-up just because I have sold so many does in the past and not focused on building my own doe herd numbers. Now I am trying to buy more replacement does so that I can raise even more replacement does.

My advice to current goat producers: determine the effective goat-carrying capacity of your farm and then try to run as many does as you possibly can.

Each doe you own is a money-making machine. Running too few does under-utilizes your property and crimps potential income. On the other hand, don't exceed the capacity of your range or pasture. This will mean more inputs of labor, feed, medicine, etc., and will cut into - or eat up - your profits.

Finding that perfect balance of how many goats per acre for your particular ranch will take time, trial and error. Here in northwest Mississippi, with a good mixture of woods, cutover timberland and pastures, we can easily run three goats per acre. With investment in more cross-fences and waterlines, that number could be doubled, but it would take a lot better manager than me to pull it off.

The situation would be different in various regions of the country. A farmer in the Midwest with 300 acres raising his own corn or alfalfa would have a vastly different operation from a goat rancher with 30,000 acres of brush in West Texas.

But in all cases, the goal would be the same - to maximize production of as many offspring as possible - bucks for slaughter and breeding stock and does for yours and other's commercial stock.

Today's - and tomorrow's - commercial doe market wants everything that the Kiko breed offers: hardy, meaty does with the mothering instinct, body capacity and milk production to raise fast-growing kids for many years to come. The Kiko's hardiness and parasite resistance is a bonus that can improve anyone's bottom-line.

Farm managers that practice strategic deworming and pasture rotation and cull until it hurts will find themselves far ahead of those that regularly deworm, medicate and pamper their livestock. Remember, the wrong kind of doe can just as easily become a money-eating machine.

The bottom line is producers need to raise more and better animals and to recruit more producers into our industry. That's where the biggest promise lies for the future of the industry, so let's get busy. All we have to do is recruit 50,000 more people to raise 300 head of meat goats a year and we'll have our 15 million ...