

Sheep breeder uses science to make right choices

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press
Brian Dietrich of Silverton, Ore., has one of four Siremax operations in the U.S. He also is a veterinarian.

SILVERTON, Ore. — Work is underway in the sheep industry that its proponents hope will help return lamb to a featured position on menus across the U.S.

Sheep have traditionally been bred for their show ring appeal, but now they are being scientifically bred for their commercial qualities.

In 1993 Siremax was formed when Columbia-type ewes were bred to Texel cross rams in an effort to breed composite sires superior to established breeds in lean growth, commercial fitness and longevity. The rigorous genetics program includes annual ultrasounds of all lambs.

No one in North America analyzed such data at the time and Siremax partnered with Sheep Genetics Australia. America's National Sheep Improvement Program has since followed suit.

Siremax has four franchises across the U.S.; two herds in Minnesota, one in Montana and the one owned by Brian and Amanda Dietrich of Silverton, Ore., where Brian is a veterinarian and owner of Abiqua Animal Clinic.

"There are a lot of people who produce commercial lamb, but they do most of their selection by eye or a few easily measured things like weight," Brian Dietrich said. "We select our genetics using complicated formulas that allow us to do consideration of their loin muscle and back fat as well as weight and other parameters."

Dietrich, who started his first flock of sheep in high school, is on the boards of the American Sheep Industry Association and the Oregon Sheep Growers Association.

This year he will be supplying rams to the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Idaho as part of a three-year breed comparison study.

"Ours is not a purebred; it's more of a composite with two or three different breeds they'll be analyzing as a potential sire," he said.

Technological developments make further comparisons possible.

"A couple of the big slaughterhouses are putting in digital machines that scan and evaluate carcasses to estimate their retail yield and the optimal way to make use of it," Dietrich said. "The slaughterhouse gets paid by the amount of retail product they can sell, and they're generally a lot happier to see our lambs coming through than lamb without a lot of genetic selection behind it."

Watching over Dietrich's 400-ewe flock are guardian dogs he breeds — a three-way Maremma, Great Pyrenees and Anatolian shepherd cross that suits him well.

"If it wasn't for those dogs I probably wouldn't be raising sheep; there are enough coyotes and dogs that people don't keep under control to make it very difficult; even bald eagles can be a significant threat to little lambs."

When alarmed the dogs give a warning bark, bunch up the sheep and position themselves between the flock and the perceived threat.

Anderson All Natural continues its family's cattle tradition

By **ERICK PETERSON**
For the Capital Press

Zillah, Wash. — As orchardist and rancher Jerry Anderson walks his property and oversees cattle being raised for Anderson All Natural, he beams with pride for his son, Kelly Anderson, who founded the company.

The father was an independent rancher for many years, and recalls raising cattle alongside his children. He got to see his children grow up raising cattle, sheep and hogs for 4-H competitions. Now, he is working alongside his son as he continues the tradition.

"Kelly went to Seattle and has done really well in finding a niche market," Jerry Anderson said.

Kelly Anderson has marketed grass-fed beef since 2010.

"In selling the beef 'on the hoof' throughout Seattle, I realized the potential for the product to be sold as retail cuts," Kelly Anderson said. "A retail beef business was created using our all-naturally raised Black Angus cattle and a USDA inspected butcher and processing facility in Basin City, McCary Meats."

He explained that the company was built "under the initial business plan to offer an effective 'online meat locker' situation where customers could purchase farm-to-table beef in a streamlined fashion and in volumes small homes in the Seattle Metro area could handle."

From there, the company has pivoted more toward direct-to-consumer sales at area



Erik Peterson/For the Capital Press

Jerry Anderson walks a field in Zillah, Wash., and talks about Anderson All Natural, a company started by his son Kelly Anderson. The father, an orchardist and rancher, supplies his son with grass-fed animals.

farmers' markets and through retail grocery outlets in the area, he said.

"In addition to expanding these avenues of sales, we are currently pursuing restaurants with the same commitment to sustainable farming practices that we adhere to," Kelly Anderson said.

Anderson All Natural's cow-calf cattle operation has been operating in Zillah on a couple different pastures totaling around 35 head on around 35 acres. The company sold much of the herd this past summer and has approximately 17 steers left. Around 20 acres were recently bought just outside Zillah, and it will be transitioning to a sustainable steer-finishing operation over the next year, he said.

"We will be purchasing steers from a few different cow/calf operations in the (Yakima) Valley that had previously sup-

plemented their herds with our cattle and have the same commitment to our proven sustainable practices," he said.

Kelly Anderson espouses high standards for herd quality, genetics and the finishing process, which distinguish his operation.

"We purchase only steers from trusted producing partners that we have had the opportunity to thoroughly vet their entire operations and bloodlines, and after a full 16 months on mother and full lush pasture we assess each steer individually to determine anywhere from 45- to 60-day grain finish (while they remain

on pasture)," he said.

He said the grain is "basically spoon-fed to the animals, and never exceeds 4 percent of their overall diet. In addition, our cattle never receive any form of growth additive of any kind."

"We know our strict and lofty standards regarding steer quality and growth-finishing schedule sets us apart from many options currently available for well-educated consumers looking to purchase farm-to-table beef," he said.

Distributing the beef in the greater Seattle area, he sells every retail cut from his steers, including ground beef, tenderloin steak, ribeye steak, New York strip steak, top sirloin steak, flank, skirt, tri-tip, sirloin tip roast, rump roast, short ribs, brisket, soup bones and offal. He is currently developing a smoked product line using round and chuck cuts.

"Our products are distinguished by our standard cut-and-wrap instructions we've developed through customer feedback over the past five-plus years, as well the way in which they're combined into our online packages creating perfectly sized and portioned packages for every household," he said. "Also, our price point is incredibly competitive with our direct competition within the market."

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