

# Lexington farm turns to desert-adapted sheep

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN  
EO Media Group

Farm owner Terry Felda has seen first-hand the value of matching genetics to environment: raising a breed of dairy sheep adapted to her region's specific microclimate.

Introducing genetics from the Assaf breed into her flock the past few years has been transformational, boosting productivity and improving her farm's sustainability.

"We can already see the difference," Felda said.

For more than a decade, Felda, 59, ran her operation with standard American dairy sheep crosses: Lacaune and East Friesian breeds. The problem was these breeds need good pasture and a temperate climate to thrive, and Felda's 450-acre farm lies among the dry, crumpled hills outside Lexington, in semi-arid Morrow County.

Felda's ewes struggled on ranges with limited forage.

"I felt I had to put a lot of feed and time into them to get them to where I



Sierra Dawn McClain/EO Media Group

**Lexington sheep rancher Terry Felda holds a lamb. Felda has introduced genetics from the Assaf breed into her flock the past few years to raise a breed of dairy sheep better adapted to the region's microclimate.**

wanted," said Felda.

For years, she wanted to bring in genetics from breeds better adapted to arid climates, such as the Awassi, native to Israel, or the Assaf, a cross between the Awassi and the German East Friesian sheep.

The Assaf, according to the Israel Dairy Board, is

prized for high milk production and tolerance to almost all climates. The breed has spread across Eurasia and today is the most important dairy sheep breed in Spain, according to the Journal of Dairy Science.

Felda was one of many American farmers who wanted Assaf genetics, but

for years, the U.S. blocked importation over concerns about scrapie, a disease that affects sheep.

Finally, in 2017, after years of negotiations with U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Spanish Department of Agriculture and European Union officials, the U.S. sheep

industry brought in Assaf semen through a University of Wisconsin-Madison project.

The Dairy Sheep Association of North America secured some of the semen, from which Felda got her first batch for Tin Willows Dairy and Sheep Ranch.

"To be able to finally get (the genetics) was huge," she said.

In 2019, she introduced the semen into her flock through laparoscopic artificial insemination. In 2020, she had her first cross-bred 50% Assaf lambs. In 2021, she milked the crosses.

Felda said the Assaf crosses gain weight faster and seem well-adapted to handle heat, stress and minimal forage. The ewes also produce more milk.

Before introducing the new genetics, each Lacaune-East Friesian dairy sheep was fed and milked twice a day but produced only 300 to 400 pounds of milk annually. Last year, each 50% Assaf ewe was fed and milked only once a day but produced up to 500 pounds of milk annually.

Felda expects the numbers would be higher if she milked twice daily, and because last year's milk came from crosses, Felda anticipates even higher production in future years as her ewes approach purebred Assaf status.

Some farms in Felda's industry started on the genetic improvement path years before Felda did and are seeing even larger gains, with some ewes producing 1,000 pounds of milk annually.

"I'm playing catch-up," Felda said.

She spoke over the chorus of farm sounds around her: chattering guinea fowl, quacking ducks, bleating lambs and the occasional bark of an Akbash livestock guardian dog.

Felda said the combination of imported genetics and new record-keeping programs available to farmers gives her renewed hope for America's dairy sheep industry.

"It's an exciting time to be milking sheep right now," she said. "And it's been a long time coming."

## Controversial animal rights proposal won't make November ballot

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

A controversial proposal on animal cruelty laws appears to be off the table, for now, but proponents of the initiative say their campaign isn't over yet.

"We just submitted the initiative for 2024 and are waiting for confirmation from the state," an organizer with the Yes on IP13 campaign said. "At this point, it does not look like we will gather enough for 2022. I believe the plan is to shift gears to the newly numbered initiative as soon as we have it."

Initiative Petition 13, otherwise known as the Abuse, Neglect and Assault Exemption Modification and Improvement Act, would remove exemptions to the Oregon animal abuse laws that protect hunters, farmers and anglers from abuse violations. That means hunters could possibly be prosecuted for killing and harvesting wild animals, as could farmers who send their livestock to slaughterhouses.

David Michelson, the author of the initiative and the lead organizer for the campaign, acknowledged the proposal's long road, and said that like other social justice reforms throughout history, it will take time.

"This is asking for quite a shift from the norm, and I think, like with any social change, it's controversial," he said. "But every social justice movement in history has been met with controversy, unfortunately."

Michelson noted a petition to allow women to vote in Oregon faced similar political headwinds in the early 20th century, but the story of how women fought for suffrage in Oregon has been inspirational to the Portland-based activist, who said he would "like to see this (initiative) as being part of that history of progressive ballot measures that push us forward."

But even if the initiative fails to muster the signatures necessary to reach the ballot this November, Michelson has his eyes set on 2024.

"We are planning, as we have always planned, to submit our initiative for 2024 with the anticipation that even if we qualify for 2022, it is unlikely that it'll pass on the first attempt," Michelson said. "Speaking back to the initiative that gave women the right to vote, it was voted on in six consecutive election cycles before it finally passed. It was voted down five times. If our initiative does not pass this November, we want to make sure it's on the ballot again in 2024."

"Their hearts are in the right place" Farmers balked at the proposal, stating it



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**A cow and calves rest in a field Thursday, March 17, 2022, along Peach Road, La Grande. Initiative Petition 13, a controversial animal rights proposal that would affect livestock, has stalled as organizers failed to gather enough signatures to put it on the ballot in November.**

wouldn't be worth the effort or the ink to do a story about the initiative. Prominent La Grande hunter Steve West, of the TV show "Steve's Outdoor Adventures," said the proposition likely would fail to gather enough signatures to make it on the ballot.

"The people who come up with this, their hearts are in the right place because they're so attached to animals," he said. "The reality is they will never get enough votes to pass something like this. I just don't see any chance in hell that they even get 100,000 signatures to even get it to a ballot. It's just so out there."

West said proposals like these have an unintended side effect of uniting groups that are opposed to similar initiatives.

"If anything, my bet is this is something that would solidify and unite the ranchers, farmers and hunters," he said. "It's probably going to unite the other side just to stamp it out once and for all."

Officials from the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation said they're not worried about the initiative, citing treaties that would supersede the law. They are, however, watching closely in the event the tribes need to take a reactionary approach to the proposal.

"We're continuing to watch and see how far it goes, and see what happens in July to see if they get their initiative fulfilled with the required signatures," said Jiselle Halfmoon, interim communications director for CTUIR. "Then, of course, we'll readdress it, but at this time we're pretty secure in our situation."

**Law experts say the proposal is misunderstood**

Russ Mead, a professor of law at Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, said what the proposal says it will do and what the two opposing factions for the proposition say it will do differently.

"Oregon's animal cruelty laws have a long list of exceptions," he said. "For example, hunting and kill-

ing livestock is exempt from Oregon's animal cruelty laws. IP13 removes these exemptions. The result is not that hunting and killing livestock will be illegal if IP13 passes, it is just that when you hunt, you need to be humane. When you kill livestock, you need to be humane."

The website for IP13 states its goal is to enact legislation that would make it so that "animals on farms, research labs, exhibitions and in the wild would no longer be allowed to be intentionally injured or killed." However, Mead disagrees with the drafters of IP13 and their proposed mission statement on the IP13 webpage. The law as it is proposed, he said, would need to be considered in courtrooms to find the exact limitations and framework.

"Anyone who says any activity will become illegal with the passage of IP13 is just flat wrong," he said. "With the animal cruelty exemptions removed, the Oregon courts will need to decide what animal cruelty is."

How animal cruelty is defined in the law, Mead said, is open-ended.

"Animal cruelty statutes seldom define what is cruel and what is humane," Mead said. "For example, statutes do not specify that beating a dog to death with a baseball bat is cruel. Or that killing a dog by lethal injection is humane."

Mead said if the proposal did muster up the signatures, and passed in the November ballot, the proposal wouldn't turn hunters into criminals overnight.

"The Oregon courts will need to decide what, if any, hunting and fishing practices violate Oregon animal cruelty laws," he said. "I could well see the courts finding leg-hold traps are cruel. But, I would be shocked if the courts found a father and daughter fishing with a cane pole animal cruelty."

Michelson said one of the secondary goals of the proposal is to help draw attention to exemptions in Oregon statutes regarding

animal abuse, and how the animal abuse laws give protections to pets but not to livestock.

"We're one of the few states that acknowledges that animals are sentient in our state statutes," Michelson said. "Yet our animal cruelty laws largely only protect our companion animals. All the other animals, whether they're in farms or in research labs or in the wild, or in rodeos and exhibitions, they're exempt from those same protections."

Michelson noted the ultimate goal of the campaign would be to ensure all animals in Oregon have

the same rights and protections that companion animals enjoy.

"Largely, what our campaign is focused on is the right for animals not to be killed or injured, to not be neglected, and to not be forcibly impregnated or forcibly masturbated," he said. "Our focus is very intentionally on that, and so we will continue the campaign until those rights are achieved."

As of March 15, the IP13 Facebook page had 344 followers, and its postings attract more negative comments than supportive ones. If the proposal passes — either now or in 2024 —

it likely would face lengthy legal scrutiny, according to Jacob Mannis, the deputy district attorney for Oregon who handles animal cruelty cases.

"It would require a lot of things to happen before it would become the law," he said. "I assume that there would be a round of lawsuits before anything gets enforced, and then there would have to be a law enforcement agency that would investigate, a prosecutor that would prosecute and ultimately a jury that would convict, because anybody in Oregon who's been accused of a crime has a right to a trial by jury."



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