

Farming potatoes, barley and ... yaks

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

ARCHER – Yaks have gone from being a hobby to a profitable business for East Idaho farmer Kent Sutton.

“It’s kind of exploded into a large hobby for me instead of a small hobby,” said Sutton, a potato and barley farmer from Archer, which is located south of Rexburg. “It’s been a really fun thing and it’s working out.”

Yaks, which are native to the high altitudes of the Himalayan region, are famous for their long, dense, shaggy hair and handlebar horns.

Sutton bought five yaks from northern Idaho about 15 years ago after his family decided to start raising some of their own food. This started with a few pigs, chickens for eggs and although his wife initially wanted to get a cow, Sutton settled on yaks instead.

“I started looking around a little bit, doing some studying, and I learned a little bit more about yaks,” he said. “I thought, I’d like to get some yaks. They do everything a cow can do, plus a little bit more.”

The animals are well suited for high altitudes and harsh weather but apparently can also do well in Idaho.

Sutton said because yaks are hardy, strong animals, they are known as beasts of burden in Tibet, China and other areas in Central Asia where they thrive.

“Where they’re from, they are used as a beast of burden, for transportation,” he said. “The people there use the yaks to get from place to place. You load them up just like you would a station wagon.”

Yaks can be raised for their meat, wool and milk, although the Sutton yak business centers around the animals’ meat.

“The meat’s incredible,” Sutton said. “If you compare it to anything, it would be similar to a bison. The fat is outside the carcass, not marbled inside the meat, so it’s extremely lean, and it’s good for you.”

The female yaks on the Sutton farm will reach about 700 pounds and males weigh up to 1,500 pounds.

Sutton grows his own hay to feed the animals and says they eat about a third of what a beef cow eats.

“They’re not really picky eaters. They seem to do good on just about everything,” he said.

Sutton said yaks have a lot of spunk – “If they get scared or nervous, their instinct is to fight rather than flee” –and can run about 40 mph.

“They’re very athletic and can jump over anything,” he said. “So we keep them in the fence on the honor system. As long as they’re happy and calm and have plenty to eat, they stay in. There’s no reason for them to go anywhere.”

Sutton said the animals do prefer the cold weather – “The first snowstorm of the year, they run around like kindergarteners during break; they just love it” – but he makes sure they always have access to shade and cold, fresh water during the summer months.

“I do all I can to provide them with a comfortable, enjoyable life,” he said while watching his herd graze and wade in water. “You can tell they’re happy.”

“More than 185 agricultural commodities are raised in Idaho and Sutton’s yaks are a good example of the creativity that is prevalent among Idaho producers, said Cam Hammond, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation’s regional field manager for East Idaho.

“Idaho agriculture is very diverse and innovative and the Sutton yak operation is a great example of that,” he said.

The yak meat is sold via Sutton’s small direct marketing business, which covers about a 30-mile radius.

“We mostly sell locally,” he said. “We deliver or people stop by our potato warehouse and pick it up.”

A restaurant in Rexburg serves “Tibetan burgers” that are actually yak meat from the Sutton operation.

“We don’t have any problem marketing the meat. It’s been very popular,” said Sutton, who said the meat is priced similar to beef.

The Suttons have farmed potatoes and barley in this area since the early 1980s, and now yaks have made a nice, and fun, addition to the farm’s portfolio.

“They’re really fun, intriguing animals,” Sutton said. “They have a lot of personality and each one has its own unique personality. It’s been fun and now it’s actually turned into a profitable business.”

For more information about the Sutton yak farm online, search for, “Sutton yaks.” 03 Aug 2023