

WINDMILL COUNTRY: Spanish goat ranchers in West Texas are becoming a growing breed

By Jerry Lackey

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Since the mid-1990s when Boer goats were increasing the goat inventory across the Lone Star State, Robert Kensing said nothing but Spanish would have a home on his Menard County ranch.

“It was during the 1970s that I visited a ranch at Hext (about 15 miles southeast of Menard) where the owner had 250 head of Spanish goats,” Robert told me. “I bought 15 nannies and a billy.”

Through the years, Robert and Doris Kensing expanded from the original 15 nannies into a sizable herd and started leasing Spanish billies to other ranchers who wanted to improve their herds.

Before the Kensing retired a few years ago, they had one of the few purebred Spanish goat herds in the country. The herd continues under the watchful eye of their nephew, David Whitworth, in Kimble County.

Recently while attending a field day on Bob and Diane Malone’s Lost Lake Ranch in Sutton County, I saw more than 200 head of Spanish goats coming to water at a windmill. Bob said they run the Spanish with Dorp-Croix hair sheep and they are very compatible in a holistic management program — working in concert with natural processes toward the triple bottom line of ecological, financial and social sustainability.

It is reassuring to see that Spanish goats are on the rise. One of my most cherished childhood memories was bottle-feeding a pen full of colorful Spanish dogies.

On Jan. 1, all goat inventory in the United States totaled 3.04 million head, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Meat and all other goats totaled 2.54 million head; market goats and kids totaled 518,000; milk goats increased to 355,000; Angora goats were down to 150,000.

“Spanish goats have been reclaiming some of the ground previously lost to their larger imported brethren,” said Micheal Salisbury, associate professor of animal science at Angelo State University.

Salisbury is director of ASU’s annual Meat Goat Performance Test, the largest and longest-running test of its kind in the U.S. About five years ago, he noticed one producer who had always brought Spanish goats to the test had begun to increase his

production, and others have joined in.

“We’ve increased the number of producers testing Spanish goats by three- or fourfold,” Salisbury told Tom Nurre Jr., an ASU information specialist. “We’ll have sometimes as many as five producers who bring several Spanish billies to put them on the performance test.”

Salisbury said in the 2010 test just concluded, only 14 of the 73 goats entered were purebred Boers, 14 were Boer-Spanish crosses and the rest were Spanish goats. That marks about a 30 percent increase in the number of Spanish goat entries over past years.

Boer goats were popular because they wean faster and heavier than Spanish, he said.

“When you look at the production between Spanish and Boer goats, the Boer goats are going to grow faster, get heavier, have a higher average rate of gain and be more efficient in feed conversion,” Salisbury said.

“Spanish goats are a little slower in growth rate, but their maintenance costs are less,” he said. “When you put them on harsher country, they tend to travel easier and hustle for food a little harder. They are able to function in areas where Boer goats probably can’t quite get enough forage to be real productive.”

Also, Salisbury said the increased market opportunities for goat meat among growing Middle Eastern and Cuban immigrant populations throughout the U.S. has jumped the selling prices for goats to near historic highs. It also has Texas producers scrambling to meet demand, which outpaces U.S. production by almost 50 percent. Another boon to the Spanish goat industry is the need for the hardier animals for brush control in the western U.S.

“On state and federal lands and along power line right-of-ways, they don’t want to use mechanical or chemical methods for brush control, so they use biological,” Salisbury said. “That means sheep and goats, and they have to be raised in areas where there are not facilities, just open range herding. Again, Spanish goats tend to be easier to care for and don’t require the maintenance that some other breeds might.”

Within a 100-mile radius of San Angelo, there are five big Spanish goat breeders who are selling 100 or more billies every year. Producers who are raising Spanish bucks have an endless market, Salisbury said.

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