

## **The Boers have conquered Kentucky farmers**

**In less than ten years, Kentucky has become the 6<sup>th</sup> highest goat producing state in the USA. The explanation lies in the demand for goat meat and in the dynamism of its producers.**

The road that leads from Frankfort, the state capital of Kentucky, to Ray Bowman's 'Jerusalem Ridge Farms', is a picturesque one. 'We chose this name because it's synonymous with peace', explains Ray Bowman, president and founder of the Kentucky Goat Producers Association (KGPA) since 2004.

A former journalist and communications specialist and a semi-professional musician (violin and guitar), Ray's story is no ordinary one. The Boer breed was introduced to Texas and subsequently to the rest of the US in 1993 in order to improve local meat production. Like many Boer producers Ray Bowman was formerly a tobacco farmer: 'I produced 4,000 pounds a year until the day when the tobacco crisis in the US convinced a number of producers to change their profession or retire'.

Today, Ray raises forty goats and five rams of the Boer variety, as well as four Quarter Horses on his 80 acre farm. He also has Kiko goats, with their black and white heads and coats: 'It's a breed from New Zealand whose meat is very popular', explains Bowman. 'In particular, crossing these animals with Boers produces an animal that is more resistant to humidity and less prone to foot rot'. But these health problems have done nothing to slow the dynamism of production in Kentucky. This spring, around 200 goats were bought in a deal by meat processors worth \$1.40 per pound liveweight. Also, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA), which monitors Boer production and supports the producers, even organised a goat sale by telephone.

### **\$1200 for the best female**

At the end of May in Paris, in the county of Bourbon, out of 96 Boer animals put up for sale in a sale organised by the producers, 90 were sold. 'I didn't buy anything' says Ray Bowman. 'But based on the prices, I believe production is going well. \$400.00 for a ram of five months, \$2,200.00 for a well bred ram of one year. Around \$800.00 for the females and \$1200.00 for the best bred female. That makes you want to do this job, and lots of former tobacco farmers who have become producers don't regret their decision.' Prices aren't just taking off in Kentucky, now the 6<sup>th</sup> highest goat-producing state, with 69,000 head, far from the 16,000 registered in 1997. This summer in Virginia a female Boer was sold for \$2,400.00 and a ram made \$3,500.00 in Texas.

### **Muslims, Hispanics and Indians**

As new as it is, the goat industry in Kentucky does not lack confidence. 'Producers from Tennessee and Georgia, where production is higher than here, and also from North Carolina and Mississippi, come and visit us to see how we work' explains Ray Bowman. 'I tell them what is needed: good production techniques and consumer trust'.

In several cities near Kentucky such as St. Louis (Missouri) and Memphis (Tennessee), as well as Chicago, a six hour truck drive by interstate highways, and New York, 12 hours away, is an expanding market described as 'ethnic' by industry professionals. The Muslim, Hispanic and Indian population, which is significant in the USA, is a major consumer of goat meat, which is why there is an almost exponential growth in demand. 'We are enjoying a favourable commercial environment that is going to last', confirms Ray Bowman. 'Even if, between March and May of this year, the price of meat had decreased from \$2.00 to \$1.58 per pound

for live weight, the prices in general have risen by 30 to 40 cent in two years. And in the future the prices should continue to rise'. The KGPA president further explains. 'The USA currently imports half of the goat meat it consumes from New Zealand and Australia and in 2001 for example, we imported 5,800 tonnes of frozen meat. This was twice as much as in 1997. Our ambition as American producers is to do everything we can so that our meat gradually replaces imported meat from New Zealand and Australia. A study has revealed that within a radius of 250 miles around Kentucky, we have a consumer base of 3.5 million people.

Representing 170 producers (150 meat producers and 20 milk producers) out of 600 goat producers in the state, the KGPA aims at 'reinventing' goat production. 'I have received a Kentucky state subsidy of \$7,000.00, which will be paid to the association,' according to Ray. 'This will help us run technical training for our members, and to publish our 'Goat Production Handbook', a guidebook on how to sell our meat to the industry and to improve our businesses'.

Training of producers, communication and marketing, are, since its beginnings, the main priorities of the KGPA. 'We publish a journal every three months, the 'Kentucky Goat's News', which is inserted in 'Farmer's Pride', the state's weekly agricultural publication. We're interested in all producers,' tells Ray Bowman, 'including those that have less than ten goats on five acres. I give them all the same advice – be technically perfect, and integrate in the network. Don't stay on the fringes. There is money to be earned in this profession. The association wants to help producers achieve this, in a similar way that the small numbers of milk producers in the KGPA are supported.'

This morning, at Jerusalem Ridge Farms, Ray Bowman has kept the best until last. The Business Monday supplement from the state's main daily newspaper, the Lexington Herald-Leader, has written a front page article on the goat producer. It highlights how the 'tobacco money', the public funds made available to help ex-tobacco farmers to convert, helped launch goat production in Kentucky. Ray Bowman comments, 'We knew how to use public money'.

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