

Growth in Florida's human population and desire by many to live in rural areas, yet work in urban areas, led to the growth of "ranchettes." Owners, wanting a way to qualify for the so-called "green belt exemption", (i.e. to be taxed at agricultural rates) have turned to goats because they have been perceived as a low labor, low input option. Although there have been producers who use goats as a brush control mechanism for larger scale agricultural operations, it is fair to say that the "ranchette type" owner deserves much credit for the majority of Florida's meat goat industry as we know it in the mid 1990s.

Expanded interest in meat goats, especially by "ranchette" owners, resulted in formation of The Florida Meat Goat Association in the Spring of 1986, as described in Chapter 6 by Ken Kenyon. At this time there was a fairly strong milk goat industry, one which received considerable encouragement and assistance by Dr. Barney Harris of the Dairy Science Department at the University of Florida. Naturally, recent meat goat producers turned to the "veterans" for guidance. But, while the strategy in milk goats is to feed large amounts of grain as a means to stimulate milk production, this practice is questionable for meat goats where nannies are only used to produce kids and relatively little difference exists between grain fed and forage fed animals for slaughter. In addition, a demand developed for a meat type breed well adapted to humid Florida conditions. This aspect has been met by effort at Florida A&M University, principally under the direction of Dr. Claude McGowan. Results of his work are partially reported in Chapter 7.

Growth in the number of meat goat producers, most of whom have been interested in development of a "quality" animal, led to calls for expanded outlets for these animals. In 1987, a project was carried out on consumer perceptions of goat meat. Research findings, reported in Chapter 3 by Robert Degner, showed that a major market niche existed among middle and upper income Floridians in addition to the traditional ethnic populations. As a result, further grants from the Center for Cooperative Projects (CCP), a project agency jointly administered between Florida A&M University and the University of

Florida, led to the support of efforts by Pat Miller in taste testing and market development. Much of the knowledge gained is reported on in Chapter 5, "Marketing Strategies for Goat Meat." The conclusion is that non-traditional consumers like the product, and retail grocery stores and restaurants are willing to sell it providing certain conditions are met. Lynn Harwell, in Chapter 4, concludes that the East Coast market is substantial and growing.

A shift from only serving traditional outlets to also targeting mainstream consumers means that goat meat must be presented and delivered in a form comparable to other meats. This sounds easy, but is a gigantic step forward for it means that a processor must invest in expensive equipment such as vacuum packaging machinery and, in addition, in market development efforts. Retailers want a consistent, homogeneous supply of readily identifiable cuts. A problem is that while the Florida meat goat industry has developed, supply has not been large enough to meet potential demand. In effect, a classic chicken and egg situation has prevailed. Development of processors has been a source of frustration to public officials, Florida Meat Goat Association members and others. The big leap is indeed a difficult step.

By the early 1990s meat goat owners and others had become aware that careful attention had to be given to calculating and evaluating production costs. Another CCAP grant allowed for development of a computer program by Simpson, and training producers and country agricultural extension agents in the use of it. Bea Covington used the program in her master thesis. The result of this thesis, in which she identified types of production systems, and costs of them, is provided in the last chapter of this publication, Chapter 9.

All-in-all, as the second half of the 1990's begins, there is reason for optimism by the myriad of people involved in Florida's expanding meat goat industry. Demand for a quality product exists, much has been learned about production of meat goats, and it appears that processing and market development problems can be solved.