

Farmer Profile
Roger & Kathleen Brumbaugh
Brumbaugh Family Farm LLC
By Michele Gauger

When speaking with Roger & Kathleen Brumbaugh about their recent farming transition from a conventional dairy to a grass-fed beef operation, they don't think they should be thought of as unique. According to Roger, who returned to his family's farm in Bedford County back in 1977 after earning a civil engineering degree at the University of Pittsburgh, "We just weren't making a profit on milking 35-40 dairy cows, and we didn't like the idea of expanding the herd to increase profits and requiring us to have employees."

So after 29 years in conventional, small dairying, the Brumbaughs decided to explore the idea of rotational grazing. "After learning more about grazing, Kathleen and I decide the best thing to do would be switching to a less labor intensive grass-fed beef operation," continued Roger. A friend actually steered them to a program managed by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) called EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program). EQIP offers financial and technical help to assist eligible participants install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land. For the Brumbaughs this assistance helped with setting up the pasture fencing and watering systems needed on their 100 acres.

Currently the Brumbaughs manage a mixed-breed herd of 100 cows, calves and steers. "Marketing was something that was brand new to us," said Kathleen. "For the first time last year we sold frozen cuts at the Huntingdon Farmers' Market. It was a challenge at first to be noticed, but now we have many customers that come to buy regularly. Having the Juniata College community in the area is a big plus for the farmers market.

The Brumbaughs also sell freezer beef by the half or split-half (a mixed quarter). We are fortunate to have two very good butcher shops who can cut and package customers' beef to their specifications, and we feel especially lucky to have a butcher shop within 30 miles who can do the USDA-inspected processing that we need to sell it by the cut. I read about another PASA member having to travel up to 6 hours to their butcher, so we are thankful we have these close resources," commented Kathleen.

Both Kathleen and Roger admit, "We are still learning as we go along." One key element they pointed out, "It is really important to have a cattle chute set-up to properly handle the animals," said Roger. "Handling a beef cow versus a dairy cow that you interact with two times a day for milking is very different. It is important to not spare costs with the set-up for the safety of the animals and humans involved," he continued.

I asked the Brumbaughs if they had any advice for conventional dairy farmers who may be looking for alternatives and Kathleen commented, "If they want to stay in dairying, they need to market their own milk. There are so many people looking for good dairy products that are rBST-free, grass-fed and/or raw." Value-added opportunities are also available with demand for local cheeses, yogurts and other dairy products also on the rise.

Roger also mentioned, "For years the dairy business has been encouraging farmers to use alfalfa as a mainstay for feed. After we converted our hay fields to pasture for the beef cows, I noticed the alfalfa in the fields was the last thing they wanted to eat."

In the years to come the Brumbaughs would also like to diversify their farm even more by adding pastured pork to their existing stock of 21 laying hens, a few Boer goats and honeybee hives.

The Brumbaughs don't have any additional employees on the farm, but the family helps out when they can. Daughter Jennifer helps with computer work and son Sam acts as farm mechanic and helps with the fieldwork on their 200-acre farm. This year Sam also grew corn for the farmers' market, as their family farming tradition continues.

For more information contact the Brumbaughs at 1171 Pinchot Road, Saxton PA 16678-8922, email knbrumb@comcast.net or call 814-928-5135.

Interview with Kathleen Brumbaugh

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

Government attempts to assure food safety through more regulations and more programs, without sufficient differentiation between small farmers and huge operations in its implementation.

The National Animal Identification System may be (or may not be) useful to keep track of the animals from a feedlot with 32,000 animals. But it is totally ridiculous to expect every small farmer to ID each and every animal. In our case, the consumer buys directly from us so he knows exactly where his eggs or beef come from. Total traceability.

Proliferation of genetically modified organisms (GMO's) and the contamination of the traditional seed supply by GMO's is a great concern.

Consumer education concerning where food comes from and how it is produced has to be a continual priority for sustainable farmers. It is easy to forget that everyone is not getting the same information that we have, because they are not

reading the same literature that we do. When the local stores began to label beef as “a product of Mexico, United States, or Canada”, we immediately picked up some new customers who did not like the idea that the beef in the store may not have come from the United States. It seemed to be a revelation to them that not all beef was produced in the US, and we thought it was common knowledge. I’m afraid most consumers are getting their food information from food labels and television commercials, instead of their own research.

What is unique about your farm?

I didn't know if we are unique in any way. Maybe leaving conventional dairying to pursue sustainable farming might be unique. I don't know that it is. It shouldn't be.

Actually, our farm has reverted to the diversified farm of its early years. In the 1950's, Roger's parents had a small dairy herd. They also had a flock of laying hens, turkeys, and a few pigs.

How has your operation evolved?

For 65 years, our farm was a small conventional dairy operation, first owned and operated by Roger's mom and dad, and then by us. In 2006, we sold the milk cows and started raising mixed-breed beef cattle, going to all grass-fed, once our stored feeds (silage and corn) were depleted. We were introduced to American British White Park cattle, so we bought several to add to our mixed herd. We like their calm disposition and strong mothering instincts and they are excellent at finishing out on pasture. We now keep a White Park bull at all times and will eventually have a herd made up entirely of White Parks.

NRCS provided a huge amount of monetary assistance through the EQIP program to put in the fencing and waterers for a rotational grazing system.

Our current operation is young and definitely still evolving. We won't reach our goal with regard to beef herd numbers until this year's calves have been weaned. We bought a few Boer goats to use for weed control, but the numbers increased to the point that we could sell half of them this year. We have 21 laying hens and one rooster. We would like to have another flock of hens to follow the cattle through the rotational grazing, but we will need to buy a guard dog first, because we do have coyotes living near us.

We started two honeybee hives last year, through the generosity of a good friend. We excitedly talked about starting 10 more hives this year. However, the hives we had were empty this spring and we have decided we will start no more than two to four hives this year and see how it goes.

We raised three pigs on pasture this year. We wanted to start with a few pigs and raise more next year if there is sufficient interest.

Why did you join PASA?

We joined PASA in 2005, when we were contemplating getting out of the dairy business, but had no clear idea of what we would do in its place. The information we received from PASA via field days, the newsletter, and the annual conference, helped us to see what was possible.

We look to PASA to keep us informed on those issues important to sustainable farmers, to provide informative field days for our continuing education, and to represent our interests at the state level.