



## Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

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# Cherry Tree Farms—Grass-Fed Beef, Goats, Sheep, Chickens, and Honey

Interview with Doyle Freeman, 478 Juniper Road, Cherry Tree, PA 15724, 814-743-6589, [ctfarms@helicon.net](mailto:ctfarms@helicon.net)

### What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

I grew up in South Dakota and spent summers on my uncle's cash grain and beef farm. It was great fun and a wonderful learning experience. The farming seed was planted in my blood, and I wanted to be a full-time farmer ever since. I went on to complete a degree in computer science at Pennsylvania State University and ended up being a building trade construction engineer foreman in Pennsylvania. However, I took every opportunity to satisfy my need to farm by living in a rural area and helping local farmers. A beekeeping friend asked me to help him manage his hives in 1990, and he became my mentor. This was the push I needed to rent a farm and become a part-time farmer with several enterprises—beekeeping, beef, and goats.

### What are your present alternative enterprises?

I rent 350 acres and own 87 acres, mostly pasture and hayland. I sell hay and manage 70 head of beef, 35 meat goat/kid pairs, 160 ewe/lamb pairs, 200 grass-fed meat chickens, some hogs, and 37 beehives on three different farms. I practice rotational grazing for the livestock, managing for maximum forage output with minimum inputs. I keep all the animals together and move them from one field to another as pasture conditions dictate. Honey is my primary enterprise.

### How did you make the transition?

In 1996, I rented 54 acres and started my animal enterprises in addition to the bees. In 1998, the construction company downsized, which left me without a job, so I started farming full time and added sheep to the enterprises. But the farm I was renting was sold for development, so I began the long search for an affordable farm. I looked at 181 farms before I found one that was affordable and would pencil out a profit for me. This 87-acre farm had had no care or management for 28 years. The buildings and land were in poor condition, but it was all I could afford. I enjoy the animals, the outdoors and working for myself. A farm is a great place to raise my son. Life is getting better every day as my son and I improve the farmstead buildings, update our equipment, and improve the productive capacity of the farm. We are slowly making it *our* farm through these improvements. We are covering our costs with enough left over for family expenses.

### What is your decisionmaking process?

I discuss my business decisions with my son. He has a vested interest in these decisions if he decides to take over later. I make my changes based upon changes and growth in the marketplace for my products. One needs to move slowly in developing a direct marketing enterprise. You cannot afford to make a costly mistake in a "learn as you go" business. We address production and marketing problem areas from the perspective of time and dollars. I minimize my expenses by

operating with old farm equipment ranging from a 1928 John Deere #5 mower to my newest piece of equipment, a 1965 Oliver tractor. These will be replaced as profits permit us to do so. My decision criteria are that each enterprise and the farm as a whole have to show a positive cash flow or I don't do it. I keep a record of every single expense so I can determine if an enterprise is profitable.

### **Do you have a business plan?**

I do not have a formal business plan. My livestock production plan is to maintain a debt-free breeding herd. I want to keep improving the herd by buying replacements, especially the males to improve the beef, goat, and sheep herds. This is done on an "afford as you go" basis. I want to improve my haying operation so we have enough wagons for a complete day of haying.

### **How did you acquire information?**

I subscribed to the Lancaster Farming Journal, helped my neighbors, attended conferences, read association newsletters, and networked. These are still my major sources of information.

### **How do you market your product?**

Today, I market my products through the Penn's Corner Farmers' Alliance and to my friends, neighbors, and other local customers who hear about my products. I do not advertise. All publicity is word of mouth. The products have that special pasture-fed taste and are low in fat. It is what the public is looking for. The product sells itself. When I first farmed and worked full time, all my products were sold at the auction barns. Now, I never use this method of sale.

### **How do you price your products?**

For the meat products, I check the local supermarket retail prices. Then, I work backward using percentages and other information to determine the price for hanging carcasses. Then, I check these prices against those of area purveyors. I also keep detailed records of my costs of production by enterprise. I use this cost information to determine the price that is

profitable for me. My local beef customers buy a quarter or half which is priced about five percent above the local purveyor price. I also sell by the cut. I charge about three percent more for my retail cuts than the local grocery store. I sell mainly frozen ground beef and pot roasts, as the restaurants take all the top quality cuts. I sell my sheep, lamb, and hogs in a similar manner. My chickens sell for about \$2.75 per pound, and I can't produce enough of them.

For honey, I charge the restaurant \$1.80 per 12-oz. bear squeeze bottle, and the farmer's market price is \$2.00. The package/label cost is 10 cents per bottle. I do not sell honey at the wholesale price of 43 cents per 12-oz. bottle, because that does not cover my cost of production.

### **What went wrong? How did you correct the situation?**

The beehives at my new farm in Cherry Tree had a parasitic mite problem that I did not have at the rented farm. This is plaguing the whole bee industry today. I began analyzing the differences in my production practices at the old and new farms. I took each step of the production process and broke it apart, and that is when I discovered that the herb spearmint was not growing on the new farm. I planted the spearmint, which drastically reduced the mite population. I also dispersed the beehives to minimize the impact of a bear attack on honey production.

My bull gored me in 2000, which made it impossible for me to work for about three months. This placed an enormous responsibility on my 11-year-old son. However, he became very adept at driving the tractor and operating other farm equipment. This experience resulted in him participating in the 2001 statewide 4-H tractor driving competition where he placed third as a 12-year old among 18-year old competitors. This responsibility has also taught him how important it is to manage your livestock and poultry in a sound and environmentally friendly way.

**What went right? And why? How did you build on your success?**

The pastures were weedy at the new farm. I wanted to operate a grass-based livestock operation with minimal input, so I began mowing the weeds. The grass soon recovered and the red clover reseeded itself. Today, I have a very nice mix of grasses and red clover including some orchard grass. I fenced my pastures into permanent paddocks for rotational grazing as well as fencing the livestock out of the creeks to control erosion and limit livestock access for drinking water purposes. I knew this rotational grazing would work because I grazed six horses, 16 sheep, and four beef cows on 8.5 acres at my first farm with this practice. It surprised all the neighbors.

**What would you have done differently?**

There is really no glaring point that appears. I am very happy with the quality of life that comes from living on the farm. It would have been difficult to continue the stressed life of a construction foreman. It is very difficult to measure success, there are so many monetary, nonmonetary, and social factors to weigh. I am very satisfied!

**Where do you plan to go from here?**

I plan to grow this farm with my son. I think we will top out at about 60 beehives, 200 ewe/lamb pairs, 100 beef, 50 goat/kid pairs, and 200 chickens per cycle.

**What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?**

1. Consistently deliver quality products on schedule.
2. Marketing through a group is superior to doing it as an individual.
3. Marketing directly to the consumer increases your share of the consumer dollar because today's farmer receives only about 20 percent

of the retail dollar through the current marketing system.

4. Know your costs. Keep track of your inventory and accounting costs by enterprise.
5. Chefs appreciate suggestions and ideas, but don't tell them how to do their job. Listen to them and produce the goods the way they use them.

**How did you handle the liability concern?**

I have a \$1-million-per-occurrence policy and a \$2.5 million umbrella policy. I purchased it from my local agent for about \$375 a year.

**What kind of promotion material do you use?**

Except for business cards, I don't have material other than what I do for the Alliance. The Alliance publishes a quarterly newsletter for its customers, members, and friends. I prepare a list of products and prices each week and e-mail them to chefs. I use these for my customers who come to the farm, but the farmers' market prices are slightly higher.

**What do you dislike the most and like the most?**

I dislike the frustration of an expected sale not occurring. Also, it is difficult working with some farmers because they need to be in charge of everything they are involved in and want every decision cleared with them, like some of the Alliance marketing decisions. On the other hand, I like working with people, working together and forming an organization. I like helping other farmers and myself increase our income through different marketing opportunities. I dislike big business trying to undercut and drive us from the marketplace using tactics such as selling lettuce-mix at \$2.50 per pound when the general market and we were selling at \$7.50 per pound in January.

**Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?**

Yes, this lifestyle is much less stressful.

**What groups/organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of the alternative enterprises?**

I belong to and am active in local and state beekeeping associations, I am a member of the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture, and I am a board member of the Northeast Federation of Family Cooperatives, and I participate in the “Farm Link” program.

**What conservation and education activities do you have?**

I use several conservation practices on my farm. I use rotational grazing and other best management grazing practices to eliminate the use of commercial fertilizers and pesticides; I am becoming an Organic Crop Improvement Association certified organic grower; I fence my livestock out of the stream and provide controlled stream access for drinking; and I have established a cattail bed down stream so water quality is improved before leaving my property. Water quality is a concern of all county residents

because of the numerous abandoned mines we have in the area. I have been working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service on improving stream crossings. My education activities range from writing articles for national beekeeping magazines; speaking to agricultural, non-agricultural, and children groups; to testifying on the National Organic Standards hearings.

**What do your customers like the most about your products or enterprises?**

The most frequent comments I hear are that our products are fresh, good, and tasty; that we use no hormones or pesticides; and that our products provide nontherapeutic antibodies.

**Would it be ok for people to contact you? Yes**

**Do you want additional information?** For more success stories and other information, go to <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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