

Meg Bickford: Highlights on a Beginning Farmer

New Durham, New Hampshire - Situated in New Durham, New Hampshire, **Diamond B Farm** is a treasure in the



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Granite State, and that's not simply due to the name. The farm is situated along the western banks of the Merrymeeting River. The Merrymeeting River begins at the outlet of the Merrymeeting Lake and flows south through a series of ponds into the town of New Durham, NH where the river enters the Merrymeeting Marsh Wildlife Management Area. Here in the marsh, the river turns northwest and enters Lake Winnepesaukee in Alton Bay, New Hampshire.

The property, which has been in the Bickford family since 1763, is rich with family and agricultural history. It is currently a growing operation with beef cows, chickens, pigs, hayfields, and a woodlot. While Meghan Bickford has help from her father, brother, and a neighbor's son, the 22-year old is largely responsible for managing the active farm.

With her parents, Bob and Robin, and brother, Nick, Meghan moved from Walpole to the New Durham farmhouse in 2006. Soon afterwards, Meghan headed for the State University of New York at Cobleskill where she earned a degree in Animal Science and Agricultural Business Management. In addition to

the classroom education, much of her knowledge and skill come directly from her experience with 4-H for approximately the past 10 years. Looking across the fields, Meghan playfully remarked, "This farm is really a 4-H project that got out of hand."

An early August 2011 visit to the farm confirmed that Meghan's business plan to increase beef, chicken, and pork sales is unfolding. A walk through the farm showed broiler chickens set out in their pen, pigs in the barn, and 33 Belted Galloways and Angus cows grazing in different paddocks on 11 acres of the Bickford property and another 35 acres of adjacent leased land.

Looking back, Meghan says, her initial interest in the Scottish Belted Galloway was initially roused because "they were cute" and because she wanted a breed of cow that was different from her father's and brother's. Over time, Meghan has continued with the breed (with currently four generations of them living on Diamond B Farm) and agrees that they are a good breed to have considering her plans for the farm. "They like grass", speaking of the rotational grazing plan she established through a USDA-NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract.

District Conservationist, **Dan Wright**, worked with the Bickfords to address other resource concerns, such as drainage issues. Under the EQIP contract, barnyard runoff from the **gravel heavy use area** is being treated via a **grassed waterway**. A **ground gutter** was installed along the west edge of the barn in November 2009. The barn roof runoff flows south into a **catch basin/underground outlet**, and is released into the grassed waterway, which keeps the water clean. A **roof** will be installed over the **manure storage**



In 1999, Meghan was the first recipient of the New England Galloway Group Heifer Project (NEGG), a project out of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. The prize was a Belted Galloway heifer calf. Since that time, Meghan continues to breed, show, and sell the cows at fairs. She was also just voted onto the NEGG's Selection Committee, in which she will have an opportunity to determine the deserving youth who will earn the Belted Galloway.

facility before winter to shield the waste from precipitation and potential leaching into the ground water. The roof runoff will be collected and directed to an appropriate outlet area. **Roof gutters** will be attached to the structure, and an underground outlet will likely tie into the existing outlet. A private supplier is currently working with the Bickfords on a suitable design, which will be reviewed by an NRCS Engineer prior to installation.

Sales and Marketing

The Bickfords currently own 33 head of cattle, consisting of 19 Belted Galloways, 3 Black Angus and 11 Angus-Beltie crosses. There are 12 cows, 3 heifers, 5 steers, 2 bulls and 11 calves. One hundred broiler chickens and 7 Hampshire/York pigs are also being raised on the farm. To grow the beef business, the farm sells all-natural freezer beef, by rounds, half and quarter steaks through private sales. Meghan also sells breeding stock and steers. Pigs are sold as wholes or halves, and "pasture-raised" chickens are sold whole. Marketing only through Facebook, most of the sales are through word of mouth and local customers committed to supporting the NH-based farm. A large part of the farm's income is derived through hay sales grown from approximately 60 acres of family-owned and leased land. The 250-acre woodlot is under a woodlot management program, with the wood sold to lumber companies.

The family is under continued pressure to sell the farm to developers. However, they appear resolute in their commitment to maintain the farming culture and property. Meghan attributes a recent summer internship at Sap Bush Hollow Farm in Warnerville, New York, with providing her valuable guidance on how to design and implement a business plan and giving her the confidence to continue the family business. Meghan attributes much of her successful work with cattle to support from the NEGG and various Beltie breeders over the years. The farm also holds several EQIP contracts that include a Nutrient Management Plan, Forest Stand Improvement, and Grazing through the USDA-NRCS.

Growth and Future Plans

Being located on the border of New Durham and Alton and between Route 11 and the Merrymeeting River has facilitated Diamond B Farm's hay and beef sales. Once supplying beef only to close family and friends, the farm's growth in beef sales is evident with a sustained year-long customer list. It should also be noted that, while 2011 marks Meghan's first year selling chickens, she already has enough orders for her 100 resident chickens. Regarding the farm infrastructure, there is an old milking parlor at the junction of the farmhouse property and Merrymeeting Road that Meghan would like to turn into a store where she could sell meat and vegetables. She would like to add turkeys and egg layers to the poultry mix and is considering incorporating Integrated Pest Management to support the haying operation.



A one-week old Belted-Galloway-Angus Calf

Together with hands-on experience with cattle, a business skillset, and an evident commitment to the farm, Meghan's leading role, and the future for Diamond B Farm, look positive. Even with a successful start, Meghan has already learned that "You don't plan days. You just learn to expect the unexpected."

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For more information:

NH- USDA-NRCS: <http://www.nh.nrcs.usda.gov/>

4-H: <http://www.4-h.org/>

New England Galloway Group Heifer Project (NEGG): <http://umaine.edu/4h/youth/4-h-projects/animal-science-resources/beef/new-england-galloway-group-heifer-project/>