

## **Pinantan Lake, British Columbia - Jay Springs Lamb Co.**

Jennifer and Chris Cunningham manage Jay Springs Lamb Co. which is the story of an evolving four family, three generation farm business that mixes agriculture, forestry, agroforestry and direct marketing. Jennifer and Chris produce free range lambs from a silvopasture operation in the Southern Interior of British Columbia. The journey began with Jennifer's parents and is evolving through to this day. Livestock management has progressed from a combination of pasture and relatively passive forest grazing systems, to a mix of extensive and intensive silvopasture practices.

Geoff and Shirley Bodman, Jennifer's parents, purchased Jay Springs Ranch in 1964 from the original homesteader. Geoff was one of the founding members of a local naturalist's group and an avid birder. Ecological and social values were an intrinsic part of family life, thus the concept of agroforestry found fertile ground with Jennifer and Chris as they became more involved with the operation.

The original settler ranched with sheep (*Ovis aries*) which has continued on Jay Springs to this day. In cattle country, one might ask 'Why sheep'? The decision came down to two major factors: economics and family. Cattle were too expensive to get into, and due to health constraints affecting Geoff at the time and off-farm jobs, sheep were easier for Shirley and the kids to manage than cattle. Jennifer and her two siblings, Jocelyn and Dean, grew up herding sheep on horseback in a very scenic part of the province, ultimately contributing to decisions to return to the farm and facilitating their current-day intimate knowledge of every corner of the ranch. In 1985, a Woodlot License was awarded to Geoff, adding a forestry dimension to their agriculture business. Currently the ranch consists of a mixture of private and crown lands<sup>1</sup> requiring and enabling differing management based on the land tenure – private, grazing lease (area-based tenure of crown land providing for rights to manage the forage resource within the lease area), and woodlot license (area-based tenure providing for rights to manage and harvest crown timber within the woodlot license area). Similar to many producers across North America, Jennifer and Chris along with various members of the family at times has supplemented ranch income via off-farm jobs. A legal partnership was created in 1993, formally bringing Jennifer, Jocelyn and Dean (and their families) into the management and operation of the ranch and woodlot. Currently, Jennifer's parents have retired. Operation and management of the timber lands resides with Dean, with help from Chris. Operation of Jay Springs Lamb Co. began with Shirley, Jocelyn and Jennifer, evolving to full-time management by Jennifer and her husband Chris.

Similar to many areas across North America, the children left the farm to pursue other careers; however, all three came back. Having been away Jennifer realized quite simply that there was 'no place like home' with natural resources, aesthetics and a tie to the land which would be hard to match anywhere else. Having gained various educations, experiences and world perspectives, they all began with ideas of what the operation would look like. However, the overall underlying understanding guiding

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of British Columbia, "Crown land is land that is owned by the Province of British Columbia. The Province is the steward of the land and can lease, license and sell Crown land for a variety of purposes including residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, tourism and recreational purposes. [http://ilmbwww.gov.bc.ca/pf/crown\\_land.html](http://ilmbwww.gov.bc.ca/pf/crown_land.html) [accessed 13 September, 2007]

development was the wish to keep all the elements of the ranch, and keep the feel of it the 'way it was'.

During the initial planning stages, personal and on-farm resources were recognized including: 1) the ranch and their desire to live on and own the ranch for generations to come; 2) the woodlot license and the grazing lease; 3) the overlap of the woodlot and the grazing lease; 4) a variety and breadth of knowledge, experience and connections brought forward by the varying family members; 5) a location providing abundant natural resources and aesthetics; 6) the family and its abilities to communicate, work, and problem solve together; 7) values placed on relationships with each other; and 8) respect for each other in the business forum and for each others' private lives.

On the policy side, one of the main factors facilitating development of the operation, and further development of the silvopasture system has been that the woodlot license and the grazing lease overlap one another, providing for access and management of two differing resources on the same area of land. This has enabled seamless management integration with their private lands, which would have been constrained had the family only had a woodlot license, or a grazing lease which occupied an alternate territory.

Concerns which needed to be addressed and continue to be an ongoing process include: 1) cash flow; 2) doing more with less each year; 3) time limitations in terms of life, farm work, off-farm work commitments; 4) changes in regulations affecting each portion of the business; 5) maturation of the ranches' traditional customer base; and, 6) personal, partner, and family needs.

Jennifer and Chris realized that to get past or work through the roadblocks, they would need tools and resources external to the ranch. They 'got curious' and: 1) attended workshops; 2) joined industry related organizations (and became leaders within them); 3) took courses relating to their interests; 4) took advantage of government programs; 5) kept up with changes in policy and regulations; 6) tried a lot of different approaches, learning from what worked and what did not work; and 7) continuously engaged the family to plan and look forward.

For Jennifer and Chris, it came down to making some big decisions about where they were going. They had the lifestyle they wanted, but they needed to take a good hard look at the operation in the economic or long-term business sense. In order to sustain their lifestyle the operation had to be economically viable.

However, given the diversity of family members involved, the business model needed to reflect their differing objectives. Thus, an overall business focus was created -- "to create business opportunities that would make the ranch and woodlot work for us and ensure financial viability and diversity. Some of the partners involved would like part-time work, some require full-time jobs and some have a pension. Our sustainable lifestyle motivates our business."

As part of the business approach, it was determined that each lamb needed to sell for more and the land base needed to be diversified. In keeping with enterprise development, they started with the customer and the product for that customer, modifying production to meet those needs. Quality, ecological goods and services and connection to the farm were all attributes of concern of the target customer. Jay Springs Lamb Co. reaches their client base through farmers' markets, and web-site, farm-gate and restaurant sales.

Because portions of the ranch grazing lease and woodlot license overlap, they were able to integrate forage and livestock production with timber production into an extensive silvopasture operation. In direct marketing the lamb product to the consumer, the story of how the lambs are raised and managed, and the ecological attributes of the production system has become a key focal point. As an example, when Jennifer mentioned to a potential customer that their sheep graze in a Green Tag certified forest with sustainable forest management, no pesticides and protection of special sites, the customer was sold. Certification and the management implications are now used in the lamb company promotions.

Awareness and interest in silvopasture came through a series of coincident events starting with their recognition that management of the sheep and the forest together were of benefit to one another. At the same time, Chris was learning about agroforestry through the provincial woodlot sector organization and both had attended workshops with specific agroforestry awareness components, which emphasized incorporating more pieces into management to yield more products. Direct marketing afforded an opportunity to move away from sheep as a commodity and meet their needs of maximizing income from each animal. They went to workshops sponsored by industry organizations and agencies, made connections at the workshops (which facilitated their first farmer's market participation), listened to their customers, and continually asked questions of themselves and others. Jen and Chris started direct marketing lamb when no one was direct marketing meat. Favorite questions were (and still are)

- Why can't it be done?
- Why can't it be done that way?

These questions refer to both the marketing and management sides. Changes in the family partnership occurred with Jen's parents retiring and one family moving more toward off-farm income. Labor has become one of the largest practical constraints. Livestock management has had to evolve to a method whereby three people can take care of it on a part-time basis. Previously, sheep were brought into the barn each night, and moved to pasture each morning. Now, fencing has been set up enabling the animals to stay on pasture with their guardian dogs over night. The animals maximize their feed access and have gone from an average 0.226 kg a day gain to 0.453 kg a day.

From the supply side of marketing, to meet customer needs, Jennifer and Chris have joined with a small group of like-minded family farms in the BC Interior to sell their lamb under the Jay Springs Lamb label. Production systems vary from more traditional pasture management to forest grazing systems, to Jennifer and Chris' silvopasture system. All producers are introduced on the website and at markets, providing the story of who the growers are and how their lamb is produced, narrowing the disconnect between the urban consumer and the producer. Added products include wool and farm tours, 'clustering' the products available from the systems. They are always looking at potentials, doing the background work on options and adding the pieces that make both business and personal sense. They have consciously made a decision that living on the farm is where they want to be and that their production methods need to come to some balance whereby environmental stewardship interests and personal 'life' choices are integrated into an overarching need to be economically viable.

The story does not stop or grow stagnant. Breeding and management adjustments are an ongoing part of life and are implemented to increase yield efficiency and reflect

quality and supply which mesh with consumer demand. “[We] spend time and money keeping ahead of the pack so our products can continue to demand the prices they deserve.” Value-adding options are being explored and more intensive silvopasture practices are being initiated in the marginal pasture areas. The target is a more diverse mix of native conifers which the sheep can be rotated through, adding to a longer season of grazing forage availability to offset winter hay feeding. Additionally, because the timber resource is coniferous, they’ve found that controlled grazing can occur at an earlier stage of seedling development than if it had been deciduous. Further, getting the meat properly slaughtered and custom cut requires keeping local meat processors in business and part of the story.

‘Managing by crisis’ can and will happen regardless of the best laid plans. As of 2006, the Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB (*Dendroctonus ponderosae* Hopkins)) outbreak in BC had resulted in approximately 9.2 million ha of red-stage trees, ranging from pure to mixed pine stands (MOFR, 2007). Projections indicate that at the current rate of spread, 80% of the merchantable pine in the central and southern interior would be dead by 2013 (Province of BC). In many ways, the woodlot has been fortunate as it is not composed solely of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* Dougl. ex. Loud.). However, the MPB epidemic in conjunction with a blowdown event has severely impacted planned rotations, and management and business plans. Drought and catastrophic fire are also always on the mind. In 2003 a major forest fire in the area came within 2 km of the woodlot. Many other producers were not that lucky. On the livestock side, lag times in capacity of the meat processing industry to meet changes in inspection regulations is resulting in severe roadblocks for small-scale producers with local or regional markets. Changes in regulations have resulted in many smaller regional processors closing, which have implications for outright access, transportation costs and competition for time in the remaining facilities. Slaughter times need to be booked 6 months to 2 years in advance which in turn affects new producers coming online, product supply capacity for new promotions, major purchases and jumps in demand. Planning is always done at least a year in advance.

On the opportunities side, there is an increasing demand for local high quality BC products, such that small-scale, direct marketing can yield a good price. Consumers are interested in knowing how their meat is produced, and there is good potential to sell more than can be produced – if the roadblocks can be surmounted.