

St. Croix County woman taps into resources to help ensure her new farm goes mostly ... According to plan

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DEER PARK — When Leslie Svacina decided to quit her job and farm full time, she wanted to make sure she did things right.

For Svacina, that's meant hours of careful business planning as well as tapping into existing networks of farm women and others.

While meetings and planning may not be every farmer's idea of a good time, Svacina says it has been time well spent.

"It can seem daunting to do it, but there are a lot of resources that can be helpful. Taking the time, I think, is important," she said, but "even with having that in place, there are a lot of variables in agriculture. We're spending more sometimes than we want to. Equipment breaks down. To move forward, bills have to be paid in the end."

Svacina, who grew up near Pulaski and got hooked on farming with her first high school agriculture class, said she's known for years that raising livestock on a small acreage was for her.

The former state FFA officer said she's always had an "entrepreneurial spirit." If all goes according to plan, her farm will be "fully operating and making money" in two years.

Svacina and her husband, Scott, have lived on their farm, Cylon Rolling Acres, since 2012, moving there from Baldwin after building a new farmhouse on the site.

On their 140-acre farm, they raise 17 Boer goats for meat and, this spring, added 15 Broad-Breasted Bronze turkeys raised on pasture since six weeks of age.

They also have a handful of laying hens and a large garden, mostly for their family, although they sell some eggs. They tap maple trees and sell the sap to Hustad's Sugar Bush in Cumberland.

Half of the property is woods, with 20 acres in pasture and hay and another 30 acres rented to a local farmer; they'd like to eventually convert that acreage to pasture and hay.

Svacina frequently handles the chores alone, as Scott, who grew up on a Rice Lake dairy farm, often is away for his job in regional energy sales for CHS.

Mom to 11/2 year-old Cody, Svacina's days are a juggling act as she balances motherhood and building a farm from the ground up.

"The idea of raising him in the country is important to us," she said.

Her daily routine is a drastic departure from what it was just a few years ago.

After earning a degree in agricultural marketing communications and a minor in agribusiness from UW-River Falls, Svacina went to work for CHS in Inver Grove Heights, Minn., then the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council.

Working with corporate giving at CHS, she developed a passion for working with college students. She went back to school to study higher education/student affairs, then went to work as a student adviser at UW-Stout. She also has worked with agriculture students at the University of Minnesota.

"I was interested in helping students work toward their career path," she said.

Last fall, with the farm growing and a baby at home, she quit her off-farm job, then back at UW-Stout, to stay home.

Taking it slow

Svacina said they've opted to make gradual changes and expansions so they don't bite off more than they can chew.

"I'm glad we started small," she said. "Starting small is good to get the feel of what you're doing versus taking on too much to start with."

They recently bought 40 acres to add to their original 100 acres, and they try to do most projects themselves, repurpose materials and keep equipment buys to a minimum.

Starting with four bred does so they could learn about kidding on a small scale, plans are to build their goat herd to about 60 head of breeding stock. Goats are sold through Central Livestock in Zumbrota, Minn., into Twin Cities area ethnic communities — mainly Muslim, Middle Eastern and Hispanic.

"We typically sell goats fall through winter," she said. "Grazing over summer utilizes our resources the most. Selling in the fall makes sense."

Svacina's goal is to sell goat meat more directly into those markets, which she expects to only strengthen as U.S. demographics shift.

"I see myself working with grocers or restaurants or larger buyers," she said. "There is a big opportunity to go more direct, but it takes time. There are differences in communities and processing and reaching a sales agreement."

Svacina hopes to add some Kiko meat goats, a hearty breed that does well on forage and is more resistant to parasites.

Recently, she collaborated with an experiential learning class at UW-River Falls to explore the feasibility of grazing turkeys, which should aid in parasite control for her goats.

"I met with them several times in the beginning," she said, "and they gave me updates."

This September, she plans to process her first batch of turkeys, purchased as chicks in April, and sell them through pre-orders and at a premium price for the holidays.

Any other additions made to the farm will have to be complementary to what they already have, Svacina said.

Getting off to a good start

Svacina said her participation in Annie's Project — an educational program focused on risk-management strategies and tools for female farmers — has been invaluable.

"I knew what I needed to do, but there was a part of the seminar ... that was good just to help me figure out what path I needed to take," she said. "It was a good motivator too."

Annie's Project was developed at the University of Illinois in 2003 and adapted in 2004 by the UW-Madison Center for Dairy Profitability to meet the needs of Wisconsin farm women, emphasizing dairy and livestock.



Leslie Svacina

Leslie Svacina tends to a large garden, raising tomatoes, cucumbers, sunflowers, snap peas and other produce.

Curriculum was developed in 2009 to assist beginning women farmers and those with value-added enterprises; it was further adjusted in 2013 to focus on direct marketing. The program has since reached hundreds of female farmers.

According to census figures, about 960 farms in Dunn, Pierce, Polk and St. Croix counties have a female identified as principal operator.

Annie's Project helped connect Svacina with her mentor, Rose Christianson, who raises meat goats near Menomonie. The Christiansons provided Svacina with her first goats and, last fall, rented out a breeding buck.

"They have helped us get started," Svacina said.

Dunn County UW-Extension ag agent Katie Wantoch, who helps coordinate Annie's Project programming in west-central Wisconsin, said they continue to host fall reunions so farm women can network.

Svacina said she also has taken advantage of beginning farmer loans through the Farm Service Agency. FSA staff have helped her "re-work the numbers" and schedule payment plans.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has been "a huge help," she said, in developing her grazing plan and providing technical expertise such as how to size and rotate pastures and set up watering lines.

"We're still learning a lot in terms of moving animals and finding the rhythm with making hay," she said.

While Svacina views her farm as a business that must pay its own way, she's quick to add that, for her, it's far from all work and no play.

"It's a business, but I enjoy doing it," she said.