

September Update & Saturday is Fall Farm Day September 20, 2012

From: Tom Barthel
Sent: Thursday, September 20, 2012 6:49 PM
To: Barthel, Tom <snakeriverfarmer@gmail.com>
Subject: Saturday is Fall Farm Day and September Update.

Hello

Saturday is Fall Farm Day at the Snake River Farm.

The day is forecasted to be mostly sunny, breezy and cool.
Sounds like perfect fall weather to me.

September Update.

In early August I wrote that we had been receiving adequate but not abundant rain.
Things have changed.
We actually received no rain in August and no rain thus far in September.
The upland pastures went from OK to absolutely dry, brown and dormant.
Fortunately, our lowland pastures are still green and providing some grass for the herds.
Not enough, however.
Since the beginning of September, I have been placing large round bales of grass hay in the pastures.
The animals are choosing to eat about 50/50, fresh grass and hay.
They are doing fine on that.
I do not intend to complain about the fall drought.
We had a much better summer growing season than most farmers, especially those farther south.
We are also fortunate to be able to buy good hay from a nearby farmer in large volume.
The hay is expensive but that is OK. Good hay is not available at any price 500 miles south.
For those of you who enjoy playing on the large round bales, there are over three hundred here now.
I expect those bales will provide a lot of play activity on Saturday.

Nancy of Quality Meats rewrote the single page instructions on processing choices for beef, bison, pork and lamb.

The instructions are improved for use and readability.
To get a running start on things, Nancy suggested that I send those revised instructions to you even before your animal is harvested. That will allow you to contact Nancy at a time of mutual convenience and perhaps avoid the work glut that occurs later in the fall.
I sent some out this week. I intend to send the documents, via email, to the rest of you who have meat on order within the next week or two.

The beef and bison harvest started this week.

Jordan helped me harvest seven beef and one bison yesterday.
The invoices went out in today's mail.
Although I am doing most of my communications with you by email, it is my intention to continue to send paper invoices out by post.
For those of you who are new, I send invoices the day after harvest. In the envelope with the invoice are instructions on what you need to do next plus some recipes and other information.

As you know, I pasture harvest beef and bison. That eliminates trauma for the animals.

I then use a tractor with a heavy loader to hoist the carcasses onto my pickup for the ride to Quality Meats.

This is the same loader that I use to handle the large round bales.

For hay the loader has a heavy tined grapple on it.

Yesterday as we prepared the last animal of the day, Jordan hit his head on one of those steel tines.

When we finished loading the carcass, I took the load to Foley and Jordan drove himself to Urgent Care where they put four staples in his scalp.

He is fine. Just a skin split.

Farms can be dangerous places, however.

We do everything we can to make things safe, especially when we have visitors.

I am just leading up to my reminder to you.

Help us keep all the kids safe on Saturday.

A short essay.

I wrote a piece on part-time farming for the Minnesota Bison Association journal.

It is tacked below.

As always, please keep in mind that it was written by an old farmer for a bunch of other farmers.

Here it is.

Part-Time Farming. There is a new documentary movie about American agriculture coming out. The title is "American Meat". The movie was produced by a New York group and it is surprisingly well done. It is sympathetic to farmers but opposed to animal confinement. I am not necessarily promoting the movie although I found it interesting. If you wish, you can learn more about the movie or see a preview by doing a simple Internet search for "American Meat".

So far this has little to do with my topic of "Part-Time Farming", but stick with me.

I was asked to be on a "farmer panel" that followed a July showing of the movie. Later, I was misquoted in a written report about the panel discussion. This is not the first time I have been misquoted. A wise man once told me, "Anytime you are quoted in a newspaper and the reporter does not make you out to be an idiot or a thief, be happy."

In this case the misrepresentation was relatively benign. The reporter ascribed to me a negative comment about part-time farming. That comment was not made by me but by another speaker. The gist of the comment was that the farming economy was so tough most farmers were only part-time. That caused me to think more deeply about the subject. Is the goal of part-time farming, full-time farming? Or is part-time farming a good end in itself?

I was raised on a dairy farm in Otsego. I have owned this farm for over forty years. I have always had an off-farm job, yet I have always considered myself a farmer.

Depending on how you define part-time farming, somewhere between 65% and 90% of US farmers are part-time, or more specifically, earn off farm income. The 65% applies if the principal farmer has a full-time off farm job. The 95% is a better estimate if you consider the farm couple as an economic unit. In that case seasonal or full-time work by a spouse also applies. How many farm families do you know with no income from off farm work? Very few.

Is that a bad thing? Maybe not. Off farm income can give us financial stability that farming seldom can. Without the extra income few could survive the changes that have occurred in farming over the past decades. Few could survive severe market cycles or weather cycles. We need a buffer and a refuge to regroup and restart.

Most of us with off farm income get many other benefits from our day (or night or seasonal) jobs. We develop skills and abilities that expand us personally. We get to meet and interact with a variety of people. Many of us travel for work and thereby see more of the world. And sometimes, it is just plain nice to do a job that is less stressful or less physically demanding than farming

But why do we farm in the first place? I have never met anyone who farmed because it was a good way to get rich. It is not. There is too much work and uncertainty in farming.

I think we farm because we choose farming as a way of life. Sociologists call that a life style choice. If that is so then when do we achieve our goal? If your kids believe they are being raised on a farm, if your grandkids think that visiting you is a trip to the farm, then you have made it.

I am to the point now in my life where I am only working off the farm one day a week. The rest of my work time is spent farming, which I love. I wish that I had thought this through years ago. I always had it in the back of my mind that I would not really succeed in my farming goal until I was a full-time farmer. That was a mistake. I should have come to peace with this long ago. It does not take a thousand acres or a thousand bison to make a farm. Part-time farming is good if it gives us and our families a farm life.

Best Regards, Tom Barthel
Secretary and Director at Large

See you soon.

Tom