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Goats in Alaska

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As one of the first animals to be domesticated, goats have played an important part in human history. Over 200 breeds around the world contribute milk, meat, fiber, leather and companionship to their owners. Goats are increasingly popular as a useful and interesting pet, a food producer for the home operation or as part of a commercial livestock endeavor. With proper management, goats can be successful in many areas of Alaska.

Although relatively easy to care for, goats do have specific considerations to address. Some considerations common to all goats include breed availability and selection, economics, facilities and equipment, nutrition, and health concerns.

Types and Breeds

Why do you want a goat? Goats may be categorized into meat, dairy and fiber breeds. Goals for your endeavor should be set so that the best type of animal is matched for the job purpose intended. For instance, any type of goat may make a good pet; however, smaller breeds, such as pygmy or Nigerian dwarf, are particularly popular. But if you want a goat to provide milk for the family, specific dairy breeds will perform better than other breeds. Making decisions on trait priorities is needed as different goat breeds have various physical characteristics, temperaments and other traits. Specific to dairy goats, productivity and milk quality should

be considered. Similarly, meat and fiber goat breeds should display appropriate characteristics. Cost is not always indicative of a quality animal. Therefore, careful research and prioritizing important aspects before final selection will help in choosing the right animal for the purpose intended. It is a good idea to spend some time researching breeds of interest and contacting goat associations and breeders for additional information before making a final decision.

Many breeds are not readily available in Alaska, and additional research may be needed in livestock sources, travel arrangements and travel regulations. Transportation regulations and costs often change, making careful study even more important.

Basic Health

Healthy animals should be active, alert, have shiny coats, not show any signs of illness or injury and be in proper condition (not overly thin or fat). They should have been wormed, deloused, and tested for and vaccinated against common goat diseases, depending on age and where they are from. In Alaska, goats should be tested for Johnnes disease and caprine arthritic encephalitis, vaccinated against clostridial diseases and tetanus, and receive other vaccinations recommended by your veterinarian. Most goats should be dehorned, which

is best done when kids are less than 10 days old. Male kids (bucks) not intended for breeding should be castrated (neutered) as early as possible to reduce stress and avoid unwanted kidding. Purebred goats are usually tattooed and ear tagged for registration purposes.



Cost Considerations

The economics of goat keeping may be variable. The costs of obtaining and maintaining goats must be weighed against the possible return from goat-related products. Meat, milk and dairy products, fiber, hides, breeding stock, packing and companion animals may all be potentially marketed. As there is not yet a widespread market for many of these products, the goat producer may need to create a marketing plan. State regulations, access to slaughter facilities, potential customers, logistics, production costs and similar applicable costs should be considered.

Adequate facilities and equipment for goats in Alaska need not be elaborate but must allow for proper care and safe handling of the animal. With sufficient bedding, food and water, most animals tolerate cold temperatures, but wet or windy weather can be a problem. At a minimum, housing should provide shelter from rain,

wind and sun, and enough space so that animals may move freely and be well ventilated. At times of extreme conditions or at kidding season, additional considerations may be needed. Bedding should be economical, clean and dry, with any palatable materials uncontaminated with toxic substances. Straw and wood shavings are popular choices.

Fencing is to ensure that the goat is contained and kept safe from predators. Goats are notorious escape artists and able to go over, under and through fence materials or gate latches. Durable, secure pens are a must. Common materials include 4- to 5-foot-high chain link, woven wire, electric fence and panel fencing. Other useful goat equipment may include feed bunks; electric animal clippers; milking stand (for dairy goats); tattooing, castrating and dehorning tools; and hoof trimmers and grooming equipment.

Goats are naturally curious, so be careful to keep items out of their reach and watch for protruding nails, sharp edges and other potential causes of injury or illness.

Feed

Goats are ruminants, meaning that they have a four-part stomach designed for digesting grass and other forages. Ruminants graze and swallow their food without much chewing and later regurgitate this “cud,” chewing it thoroughly and then swallowing it again. Microbes in the rumen part of the stomach help to break down the plant fibers into usable nutrients.

Goats prefer browse (woody plants) but also eat grass, weeds and quality mold-free hay. During the winter, kidding or milking season, goats will benefit from supplemental grain or pellets, which provide extra energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. Any changes in feed should be done gradually over several days to allow rumen microbes to adjust to a new type of feed and reduce digestive problems. Fresh water and mineralized salt with selenium should always be available. Open water is a necessity for goats, so water may need to be heated during the winter.

General Care

When given adequate shelter, food, water and preventative vaccinations, goats are relatively healthy animals. Routine trimming should be done as needed to keep hooves level; worming and delousing should be done periodically. To minimize health issues, preventative management should be emphasized. Always research the animal’s health history, isolate new animals, keep housing and feeding areas clean and control pests and predators.

Reproduction

Most goats are seasonal breeders and will only breed from late summer to early spring. They are able to breed within the first year and will come into heat (estrus) approximately every 21 days, for several hours to a couple of days. Does and bucks over three to four months old should be separated to avoid accidental breeding. Before breeding a doe, plans should be made for any offspring.

Gestation is approximately five months and twins are common.

Goat owners should be prepared to deal with problem births; however, goats are usually good mothers and need little human assistance. Goat kids at dairy operations are often bottle raised on powdered goat milk replacer.

Summary

On a production level or as a pet, with proper care and management, goats can be the focus of an interesting and viable livestock endeavor in Alaska. A current or potential goat owner may find the following resources helpful for information on the topics covered. Additional resources may be available through goat breed associations, educational facilities, government agencies, livestock organizations and suppliers.

Websites for More Information:

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University Goat Program: www.famu.edu/cesta/main/index.cfm/cooperative-extension-program/agriculture/small-ruminant
Langston University E. (Kika) de la Garza Institute for Goat Research: www.luresext.edu/goats/index.htm
Maryland Small Ruminant Page: www.sheepandgoat.com
National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service: www.attra.ncat.org
Oklahoma State University Goat Resources: www.ansi.okstate.edu/LIBRARY/Goats.html
University of Florida Extension Dairy Goat Production Guide: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/DS134>

www.uaf.edu/ces or 1-877-520-5211

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