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*Letters from the Farm*

## **JANUARY 2009**

### *Baby, It's Cold Out There!*

Brutal cold is how I will remember our first January in Pennsylvania. Up until December, this winter had been delightfully warm. A few insignificant snowfalls had come and gone. Temperatures were mild for working outside. The sheep were grazing happily until after Christmas, which helped conserve hay supplies. We were making steady progress on our "clean up and build" list.

This state of bliss came to a screeching halt in mid-January when an arctic blast swept down from Canada and blanketed us for a week. Nighttime temperatures plunged into the negative, and the thermometer struggled all day to reach 10 degrees.

Cold temperatures by themselves are not a problem for our animals, as long as we provide shelter and bedding. The cows and horses have 3-sided shelters with straw bedding. We do not blanket them, but allow them to grow a thick winter coat. What amazes me is how well the cows take care of their calves. I'll go check them on a freezing morning, thinking to myself "*I'm glad I'm not a tiny calf*". There they are, snug in their shelter. The cows lay down, and the calves snuggle close. I can feel the heat radiating off their bodies.

The wooled sheep have 4 inches of protection from the elements, and the Katahdins (the hair sheep) have a thick haircoat like a horse. They seek shelter either in a hollow or behind a natural windbreak, and lie in a group to share heat. 70 sheep lying in a mass creates a lot of body heat.

The pigs remind me of people in the winter: they stay inside their house and sleep a lot. They don't have much to do, because their favorite hobby is rooting up the ground with their noses. Our Pennsylvania red clay is frozen solid right now.

### **WATER PROBLEMS**

Providing unfrozen water is the biggest challenge in winter. Although livestock will eat snow, they can't get nearly enough water that way to meet their needs. A sheep needs 3 gallons of water per day in winter, a cow up to 14. Until the cold snap, we had an easy watering system. The sheep had a huge reservoir that we filled weekly. The pigs and cows had a constantly running spring. Our only work was to glance at it daily to make sure it was running and no one had knocked the hose out.

Then came the cold snap.

*On Monday, the pig spring froze.*

*On Tuesday, the cow spring froze*

*By Wednesday, the sheep tank was solid ice.*

*On Thursday, the barn water froze.*

This didn't mean the animals went without water. We do have a back-up system: a barrel of water and a hose. Alas, it meant being out in the wind-swept fields twice a day for 20 minutes, in temperatures which froze our hands in 9 minutes. Dave and I worked together for moral support, but these were trying times.

## **PAPER FARMING**

Fortunately, not all the winter farmwork takes place outside.. January and February are critically important months for planning and ordering supplies for the coming year.

For the sheep, January is the time to prepare for lambing and shearing. We take inventory on our health care supplies and order what's needed. We sharpen our clipper blades and stock up on wool bags. We calculate how much grain we'll need to feed the pregnant ewes and order it from the feed mill. On February 9, the entire flock will move from the pasture to the barn for shearing, vaccinating, and grain supplementation. Lambs will be born in mid-March. Everything must be in place ahead of time.

We also prepare for the 300 plus meat chickens we'll be raising in the summer. We order baby chicks from the hatchery, speak to the feed mill about estimated feed costs, and evaluate our equipment. Because this is our first year on the new farm, we have a few chicken shelters to build this winter. The first chicks will arrive in April- we have less than 3 months to get ready.

We have an interesting addition to our chicken business this year: a custom-raised batch of soy-free birds. A customer approached us with a very special request. She has a severe soybean allergy, to the extent that she cannot eat meat from an animal who has eaten soybeans. Because soy is such a common feed ingredient, she couldn't find anyone locally who raised soy-free chicken. Our son Kevin took this on as a challenge, did some "out of the box" thinking, and decided to give it a try. With some old-fashioned breeds and a cooperative feed mill, we are raising a batch of free-range, soy free chickens this year.

The other parts of the farm which come to life on paper in January are the plants. The vegetable garden, berry plot, orchard, and pick-your-own flower garden are in the planning stages. Seeds and plants have been ordered. Sketches have been made on graph paper. Soil tests that were taken before the ground froze have come in, and the fertilizer recommendations added to this year's budget. The first seeds have already been planted: flats of lettuce in the window sill now means salad in April.

## **SHEARING TIME NEXT MONTH**

Your adopted sheep will be sheared next month. If you want to come to the farm and take home the fleece, let me know. Otherwise, we'll mail it to you. Watch for a large, but not-too-heavy box in the mail!

Sincerely,

Caroline Owens