

Farmer Profile

Jo-Ellen and Mike Green

Upland Lawn Farm

By Michelle Isham, PASA member

When Jo-Ellen and Mike Greene began their career as farmers in 2003 they had two goals – to bring Red Poll cattle back to the Northeastern United States and to raise grass-fed beef. The retired Naval officers have made significant progress toward their first goal – stock from their 100-plus acre Upland Lawn Farm is now in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. As for raising grass-fed beef, the Greens have been less successful. The demand for their Red Poll stock has simply been too great. “Our purpose was two fold: one to bring the Red Polls back and the other was to sell grass-fed beef. Right now people really want the calves,” said Jo-Ellen “We can’t keep them for ourselves,” added Mike.

The Greens took an unlikely route to farming. After growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia and New Jersey and each spending more than 20 years in the Navy, the pair retired to land owned by Mike’s parents’ in Thompson Township in Susquehanna County. Around this time Jo-Ellen read a magazine article about heritage livestock breeds that peaked her interest. “I was interested in all livestock – cows, pig, sheep. And I still am. But we wanted to do grass-fed beef,” said Jo-Ellen.

After much research, the couple decided on Red Poll cattle, a dual-purpose breed that can be raised for both beef and dairy production. The breed’s quiet dispositions and naturally polled characteristic made them a perfect choice for rotational grazing where ease of handling is desired. Many Red Polls still carry the ability to be used in a dairy operation, either crossed with other dairy breeds or on their own. The milk is high in protein and butterfat, making it especially good for cheese.

Mike joked that polled cattle – which have no horns – were especially appealing to the novice cattlemen. “You’ve got two people who know very little about farming – who’ve been in the Navy for 20 and 22 years – the last thing you want to do is worry about getting gored by a Long Horn,” he said.

Joking aside, the Greens take their role in preserving the breed very seriously. “Many traditional or heritage breeds are an essential part of the American agricultural inheritance. Once lost, genetic diversity can never be recovered. But these breeds are not museum pieces. In order for them to survive, they must be able to retain or regain their rightful place in our country’s agriculture. That is what, in our own small way, we hope to accomplish,” said Jo-Ellen.

Cattle made sense for the Greens who had no previous farming experience but had settled in a dairy-farming region. Their neighbors became a valuable source of livestock knowledge and advice. As Jo-Ellen pointed out, “It was hard if you

are not from a farming background and you have no experience in farming, it's difficult to break into farming. Most people ... are just assuming that you know cows and what to do with them. A lot of it's not documented. It's not written down. It's in farmers' brains," she said.

Despite the steep learning curve, with the help of neighbors and organizations like the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and PASA, the Greenes have succeeded in building a second career as farmers. "Obviously, we made and still make our share of mistakes but with the generous help of our farmer friends and the invaluable advice of our national resources experts, we've come a long way," said Jo-Ellen.

To learn more about Upland Lawn Farm, contact Jo-Ellen and Mike Greene by phone: 570-727-2321, by mail: PO Box 165 Thompson, PA 18465 or visit the American Red Poll Association website at www.redpollusa.com.

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

As strange as this may sound from two individuals who spent two plus decades of their lives working for the government, excessive government interference coupled with too much special interest influence on our politicians and government entities has been and will continue to be the overriding critical issue for sustainable agriculture. Just look at the mind-numbing regulations for organic production, food kitchens, small abattoirs and the list goes on. Even though we are not dairy farmers, we are surrounded by dying middle-sized farms; a direct result of a broken milk pricing system that can be made to work (HB 1722) if it could only get out of a committee in Congress! It takes a strong-minded individual or family to take on sustainable or any farming in the twenty-first century! A wise man once said, "Government that governs least, governs best."

No matter which political party is in office, fixing what ails our food system and its farmers must come from the farmers themselves and organizations like PASA, etc. The local food movement is a wonderful step in the right direction, but farmers and sustainable agriculture must get clout. If we can't get our case in front of all of the American people (inner city included), if we can't get the attention of our politicians and our government, we will eventually lose. All of us need to work together to figure out how to prevent that from happening.

The only other issue that we feel has been at a critical level is the shortage of large animal vets. We lost a valuable heifer and calf because we could not get a vet to our farm in time. With such a small farm as ours, this was a huge blow. We are thankful that the state and the country have realized the impact of this shortage and are now addressing it.

What is unique about your farm?

Our farm is raising a breed of cattle that has not been seen in the state since the

early twentieth century and we are encouraging other local farmers to do the same.

How has your operation evolved?

We took an old dairy farm that would have melted into the landscape in another 10 years and resurrected the buildings and fields, with the aid of National Resources Conservation Service to permanently fence in several pastures for rotational grazing, install a solar watering system for our upper pastures and repaired an animal walkway. As you can see, we do use the government for certain things (that we couldn't afford to do otherwise) but always in moderation! We also installed inner paddocks and a barnyard drainage system at our own expense.

Our herd has grown slightly, but we are always going to be a small breeding operation given that there are only two of us. When the time comes we hope to turn the farming operation over to a willing and enthusiastic family who will continue on our efforts.

Why did you join PASA?

We joined PASA to find out about sustainable agriculture. As total neophytes, we were literally starting from ground zero. We took the beginning farm track at the 2003 conference to find out whether we were going to be able to do this, It is not an exaggeration to say that almost everything we learned we owe in some way to this organization. It is a vital entity that has proved its value time and again by fighting the battles that must be fought if we are all going to be successful.