

Imperial Stock Ranch Heritage Lamb/Fiber Marketing

Jeanne Carver

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Situation:

In the late 1990s, inexpensive imports and limited processing facilities crimped markets for American lamb and wool. To counter these trends, Jeanne and Dan Carver decided to try direct marketing the lamb and wool produced from their 140-year-old Oregon ranch. They raise 250 Columbia ewes and 800 Angus-based mother cows on 32,000 deeded acres, along with 3,000 acres of no-till grain and 300 acres of hay.

Given the ranch's heritage raising Columbia ewes, the Carvers wanted secure their own markets, set their own prices and assure that the sheep remained profitable and sustainable.

Objectives:

- Search out and develop relationships with small custom processors
- Develop retail products
- Develop relationships with retail outlets for those products
- Serve as a model for other producers who wish to fill the need Imperial Stock Ranch perceives exists



Imperial Stock Ranch fashion recently appeared on the cover of *U*, an advertising supplement to *The Bulletin* newspaper in Bend, Oregon.



Jeanne and Dan Carver of Imperial Stock Ranch.

Actions:

To secure markets for their lamb, the Carvers:

- Found a processor who could deliver the kind of uniformity and portion cuts required for direct sales to restaurants.
- Met with key chefs to determine the best cuts and pricing to benefit them and the processor and still give customers a quality product at a competitive price.
- Developed display pieces "to tell their ranch's story" and helped train managers and wait staff to effectively sell their lamb
- Marketed their lamb as a fresh spring all-natural product, locally grown on a highly awarded sustainable ranch that is one of Oregon's agricultural treasures.

For their wool, the Carvers:

- Researched wool processors to find one that could receive raw wool once a year and scour and process it according to their requests.
- Visited yarn and fiber dealers and learned there is a high demand for local wool products.
- Developed their own designs to sell to hand knitters as a kit with a pattern and fiber to make a garment.
- Developed ready-to-wear designs in response to growing demand.
- Worked with professional photographers to provide quality fashion images for catalogues and sales pieces.
- Researched tanning operations and learned they needed to take the raw hide to a final and unique product stage as lambskin fashions.



At left, a Shepherdess felted purse, a fall 2006 hand knit kit product. Center, a ready-to-wear design sold through a national retailer. Right, a 2006 lambskin vest from the pelts of market lambs.

Results:

In both lamb meat and fiber, everything produced on Imperial Stock Ranch is now being sold by retail customers.



Imperial's meat and fiber marketing program has mean Jeanne Carver spends time working with world class photographers and chefs.



Impacts or Benefits:

The marketing efforts have led to more predictable, stable markets, increasing ranch profitability.

Satisfying demand for Imperial Stock Ranch fiber products has provided employment for more than a dozen women in the region who work from their homes doing all phases of garment design and production. This segment of the Imperial Stock Ranch marketing program is continuing to grow. In 2008, the ranch will add four new positions in its textile marketing segment. Sales are expected to quadruple in 2008 compared with the previous three years' averages, which will provide added work for artisans who create the fashions.

Imperial Stock Ranch is also experiencing an explosion in meat sales. The ranch is currently sourcing lambs from neighboring producers who purchase its breeding stock. And the success of the lamb marketing program has spurred demand for Imperial Stock Ranch beef, driving growth in the meat marketing segment.

Many producers have contacted the Carvers seeking counsel on direct marketing and what it involves. In addition, some have become sources for fiber to include in the textile and fashion lines, contacts that are leading to partnerships.

Jeanne and Dan Carver are frequently invited as speakers at such venues as:

- Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board Convention
- Ecological Farming Conference in California
- Oregon Women for Agriculture State Convention
- Wasco County Historical Society Annual Convention
- Numerous in-store demonstrations

In addition, they conduct numerous ranch tours, including:

- Jackson County Cattleman
- National Marine Fisheries and Bureau of Land Management
- Slow Food Convivium
- Wine Groups
- Northwest Regional Spinners Association



Imperial Stock Ranch lambs at six weeks of age.

Recommendations:

For producers considering a similar marketing path, Jeanne Carver offers these points to ponder:

- Clearly define what you want your life to look like – take a holistic approach.
- Remember that whatever level of work you anticipate, it will be more.
- Make sure you love what you are doing – passion will be your greatest asset.
- Be adaptable without compromising your values; changing conditions, circumstances and consumer needs and interests will require creativity and adaptability.
- Try looking at your operation from a different angle: "Instead of raising cows and sheep, we raise beef and lamb for the table," says Carver. "Instead of harvesting wool, we raise fibers that are the basis of our fabric, garments and product lines – subtle yet critical mindset changes."