



Vermont Dairy Goat Report

Tier 1: Small-Scale Producer Profile (27–150 Does)

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About This Publication Series

This report focuses on Vermont dairy goat producers operating in the **small commercial range of 27 to 150 milking does**. Data are drawn from a Vermont producer survey conducted by UVM Extension. Financial benchmarks draw on results from DAIRY GOAT TRANS version 2.26, a national benchmark tool (Tranel, ISU Extension, 2024).

Tier 1 producers represent a distinctly different business model from the larger commercial tiers. Three of the four farms that are in this tier sell cheese as their primary product through direct-to-consumer channels. Of the two farms that also ship fluid milk, one still identifies cheese as its top revenue source. Only one farm reports fluid milk shipping as its primary market. This market structure is fundamental to interpreting the data in this report: standard commodity benchmarks built around fluid milk pricing do not fully capture the economics of a value-added artisan cheesemaking operation.

This report is based on the data available and demonstrates important data gaps and shortfalls in available financial information to describe this business model. Ongoing research is needed to better represent the current conditions on Vermont goat dairy farms. The series of publications on different scales of dairy goat business profiles is intended to spotlight the key financial and management indicators used to evaluate farm business performance. These indicators can be used by managers and prospective dairy owners to understand the challenges and opportunities to goat dairy viability. For this series, we will examine feedback from survey respondents that fit into the following tiers:

Tier	Does	Description
T1	27-150	Small commercial (this publication)
T2	151-249	Mid-scale commercial
T3	250-500	Large commercial

Tier 1 farms in this dataset average 95 milkers at peak production. There were only 4 farms contributing data to this study. **All figures should be treated as directional rather than statistically stable. Please interpret all means with caution. Treat all data in this report as informational, not definitive.**

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Key Findings

A Value-Added Business Model

The dominant business model among Tier 1 farms is farmstead cheesemaking sold direct-to-consumer. Three of four farms identify cheese as their primary product. This means the relevant financial comparison for most Tier 1 farms is not the commodity fluid milk benchmark but the economics of value-added dairy processing, which typically generates higher revenue per unit of milk but also carries additional processing, labor, licensing, and marketing costs.

Highest Per-Doe Production of Any Tier

Tier 1 farms average 2,592 lbs. of milk per doe per year, the highest of any tier in the survey and 13% above the GOAT TRANS benchmark of 2,300 lbs. This is a remarkable result for the smallest herd size category and likely reflects the intensive management attention that smaller operations can apply to individual animals, as well as selective genetics prioritized for artisan cheese quality. Given that grain inputs are comparable to other tiers, this production level suggests strong feed conversion efficiency. ***Note that one farm in the sample has skewed this data upwards. We included its data because the farm has herd genetic management practices worth noting.**

Spring-Concentrated Kidding Reflects Farmstead Production Cycles

86% of Tier 1 kidding occurs in spring, the most seasonal pattern of any tier in the survey. Aligned with natural breeding cycles, this concentration is consistent with an artisan cheesemaking model where seasonal milk supply supports a defined production calendar rather than the year-round supply obligations of a fluid milk processor contract. Seasonal production also allows farms to align peak labor demand with the spring boost and manage a lower-intensity period through winter.

Aspiration Gap Is Present

Tier 1 farms operate at 63% of their stated peak milker goal (153 does), with an average gap of 58 does between current and goal herd size. This reflects a cohort that is growing more deliberately. Replacement

stock at 18% of herd is the lowest of any tier, suggesting these farms are not aggressively accumulating replacements for rapid expansion. Pairing that data with the fact that the average age of operations for this tier is 15 years, compared to 10 for the whole sample average, we see a cohort that is settled into its management practices.

GOAT TRANS Benchmarks Require Significant Interpretation

The GOAT TRANS 100-milker model, built around commodity fluid milk at \$60/cwt, produces a net cash return (before unpaid labor and equity costs) of \$28,100. This result should not be read as evidence that Tier 1 farms are financially unviable. It reflects a mismatch between the benchmark's commodity revenue assumptions and the value-added revenue model that three of four Tier 1 farms actually operate. A farm selling cheese direct to consumer is likely generating substantially more value per unit of milk than any commodity benchmark can capture.



Goats in parlor at Sage Goat Dairy in Stowe, VT

Survey Data: Tier 1 vs. All Tiers

Table 1. Herd Composition

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers
Animal Counts (mean)		
Peak milking does	97	244
Dry does	32	44
Replacement does	32	118
Breeding bucks	6	9
Meat goats / wethers	0	2.5
% of Total Herd (Tier 1)		
Peak milking does	57%	58%
Dry does	19%	10%
Replacement does	19%	28%
Breeding bucks	4%	2%
Meat goats / wethers	0%	1%
Capacity and Goals		
Goat milkers at peak	153	345
Peak-to-goal ratio	0.63	0.70
Gap: goal minus actual (does)	56	104
Adult cull rate	8%	12%

Table 2. Milk Production

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Avg. Milk /doe /yr (lbs)	2,592	2,009
Est. annual herd production (lbs)	283,364	N/A
Lactation length (days)	464	438
Adult cull rate	1.25	2

Table 3. Grain Inputs (lbs / head / day)

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Milking does	3.44	3.41
Dry does	0.81	1.13
Kids	0.81	0.96

Table 4. Primary Market Channel

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Primary Market Channel (# of farms)		
Cheese — direct to consumer	3 of 4	6 of 16
Fluid milk — shipped	1 of 4	10 of 16

Table 5. Labor

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Total employees	4.25	4.1
Total Family FT	1.5	1.6
Total Non-family PT	3.5	2.5
Estimated total FTE	3.25	5
Lowest hourly rate	\$18.25	\$16.75
Highest hourly rate	\$24.50	\$20.42

Table 6. Kidding Seasonality (%)

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Spring	86.3%	65.6%

Table 7. Business Context

Variable	Tier 1 (n=4)	All Tiers (n=16)
Years in business	15	10

Comparison to GOATTRANS

The GOAT TRANS 100-milker Vermont model provides the closest available commodity benchmark for Tier 1 operations. However, because three of four Tier 1 farms operate primarily as value-added artisan cheesemakers selling direct to consumer, *the fluid milk benchmark figures in this section apply only in part. They are presented here as a reference point, not as a performance standard for this tier.*

GOAT TRANS figures reflect data from “high-producing” farm data collected from the Northeast US region and adjusted to a Vermont-based 100-doe operating scenario at \$60/cwt milk price. Financial benchmarks draw on results from DAIRY GOAT TRANS version 2.26, a national benchmark tool (Tranel, ISU Extension, 2024).

Table 8. Production Benchmark Comparison

Metric	Tier 1 Survey	GOAT TRANS 100-Doe
Milk / doe /yr (lbs)	2,592	2,300
Est. herd production (lbs)	283,364	235,724
Peak milkers	96.5	100 (modeled)
Location length (days)	464	Not specified
Does / FTE (est.)	-30	167 (modeled)
Primary market channel	Cheese DTC	Fluid milk \$60/cwt

Table 9. Production Benchmark Comparison

Metric	Your Dairy	GOAT TRANS 100-Doe
Milk sales / doe		\$1,200
Purchased feed cost / doe		\$731.50
Total Cash Income		\$128,600
Total Cash Expense		\$93,100
Net farm income		\$28,100
Return on Assets (ROA)		1.8%
Unpaid labor (\$/hr)		\$11.80
Break-even / cwt sold (including inventory changes and overhead expenses)		\$61.75

What the Comparison Tells Us

The Benchmark Limitation

For most Tier 1 farms, the GOAT TRANS commodity benchmark is not the complete measuring stick. A farm converting milk into artisan cheese can translate to an effective milk value far above \$60 per cwt depending on several value-adding factors. The relevant financial analysis for these farms includes processing cost, packaging, licensing, farmers market or retail fees, and direct marketing labor, none of which appear in our version of the GOAT TRANS framework.

Production Quality Over Production Volume

This tier has highest per-doe production in the survey, consistent with what artisan cheesemakers prioritize: milk quality matters more than raw volume when the end product is artisan cheese. We assume that production goals reflect strict focus on breeding and management decisions that emphasize cheese quality rather than fluid milk volume.

The Debt and Scale Assumptions

The GOAT TRANS 100-milker model assumes 0.6 FTE of unpaid labor at \$25,000 per FTE, the lowest labor assumption of any scale model. This reflects a part-time or supplemental income operation rather than a full commercial dairy. Vermont Tier 1 farms averaging 4.25 total employees and 15 years in business are likely carrying more operational complexity than the model assumes, particularly those running cheese processing facilities alongside their milking operations.

What This Tier Needs from Research

The most pressing data gap for Tier 1 is a value-added enterprise budget framework that captures cheese processing yield, direct marketing costs, and effective milk value per unit of cheese produced. Without that framework, the financial performance of most Tier 1 farms cannot be meaningfully benchmarked against any existing tool. Development of a Vermont-specific artisan dairy enterprise budget is a priority for future research.

Implications for Tier 1 Producers

Know Which Business You Are In

The most important planning distinction for a Tier 1 producer is whether their primary revenue model is commodity fluid milk, value-added cheese, or a hybrid of both. Each model carries a different cost structure, different labor demands, different licensing and regulatory requirements, and a different financial performance framework. Applying commodity benchmarks to a cheesemaking operation will understate revenue potential and skew cost priorities. Tier 1 producers should build their financial analysis around their actual market channel first and use commodity benchmarks only as an input reference.

Per-Doe Production is a Genuine Competitive Advantage

Tier 1 farms achieving 2,592 lbs. per doe annually, the highest of any tier in the survey, have a real and quantifiable asset. For a cheesemaker, this could translate directly into more cheese per animal without additional feed cost. Protecting and improving this per-doe production level through genetics, nutrition, and extended lactation management appears to be a priority investment.

Seasonal Production Has Financial Logic

Spring-concentrated kidding and seasonal milk production are not limitations to overcome on the path to a larger operation; they are financially rational choices for most artisan cheesemakers. A farm that produces at peak in spring and early summer, processes through the summer and fall, and markets through direct channels is running a coherent seasonal business model. The decision to shift toward year-round production should be driven by processor contract requirements or demonstrated market demand, not by the assumption that year-round is inherently more profitable.

The Growth Decision Deserves Careful Analysis

The aspiration gap of 56 does between current and goal herd size at Tier 1 suggests that most farms in this

tier want to grow. For a cheesemaking operation, growth means more milk, but it also means more processing capacity, more direct marketing effort, and potentially a shift from owner-operated to employee-managed production. The financial case for growth must account for all of these costs, not just the milking herd economics. A farm adding 56 does, roughly a 50% increase in herd size, without adding processing and marketing capacity will not improve its financial position.

Genetic Investment Pays Differently Here

Because Tier 1 farms are selecting genetics for cheese quality rather than raw fluid milk volume, the relevant breeding metrics include milk component consistency, and udder health rather than peak production alone. Vermont's limited access to technical assistance professionals and proven breeders affects this tier as it affects all tiers, but the selection criteria are distinct.

Labor: Processing Adds Complexity

A cheesemaking operation carries labor demands that extend beyond the milking parlor: processing, aging, packaging, and direct marketing all require skilled time. Future research should capture labor hours by activity type to distinguish milking labor from processing and marketing labor at this scale.

15 Years of Experience

Tier 1 farms average 15 years in business, the longest tenure of any tier. These are not new operations finding their footing, they are established farms with deep, accumulated knowledge about what works and what does not in Vermont farmstead dairy goat production. Their practices around genetics, seasonal breeding, cheese quality, and direct marketing represent a body of practical knowledge that future survey instruments and extension programming should capture and share more systematically.

Recommendations for Managers

Vermont's Tier 1 dairy goat farms operate at the intersection of agricultural micro-entrepreneurship and artisan food production, a combination that is both a strength and a planning challenge. The prevalence of direct-to-consumer cheese sales among these farms reflects Vermont's robust local food economy, its culture of farm-to-table production, and a consumer base willing to pay premium prices for regionally made artisanal products. This situation reflects the importance of the local economy in Vermont. These producers are not competing on regional or national levels. This highlights the need for service providers to focus on the local economic context of benchmarking. The benchmarks that exist for dairy goat production were not designed with the Vermont artisan cheesemaker in mind, and the identification of better indicators that inform financial analysis and management for these unique business models is an important next step for this group of farms.

References

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DAIRY GOAT TRANS ver. 2.26. Tranel, L. ISU Extension. Copyright 2026.

Vermont Dairy Goat Producer Survey. UVM Extension Agricultural Business Team. n=16 total; n=4 Tier 1. (In review)

Special thanks to the farm owners that participated in the survey. ∞