



## Hannah Sessions & Greg Bernhardt Blue Ledge Farm

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First-generation farmers Hannah Sessions and Greg Bernhardt started Blue Ledge Farm in 2000. Young and ambitious 25 year-olds, they bought 150 acres of what used to be a 600-acre cow dairy farm in Salisbury and converted it to a goat dairy because they saw a strong niche market for goat cheese. Hannah grew up only six miles away and had strong connections to the area, so the location was a natural fit. They both had full-time, off farm jobs for the first five years after starting the farm. This financially enabled them to purchase the farm and pay for the start-up costs while beginning to build efficient practices, infrastructure, and markets. They sold the development rights to the Vermont Land Trust which gave them additional capital for improvements on the farm.



Initially they sold and shipped their goat milk to Vermont Creamery so Blue Ledge Farm could focus on developing their production systems. They then began making fresh chevre because it was quick to produce compared to other cheeses and sold it at nearby farmers markets.

In their first year making cheese Blue Ledge produced 8,000 pounds of cheese milking 40 goats who browsed 20 acres of silvopasture and grazed 20 acres of open pasture. They gradually increased the size of the herd to 165 goats, milking 125, and with an added 5 acres for grazing and using other purchased feed, they grew cheese production to 50-60,000 pounds a year. As the partners grew their market and experience in cheesemaking, they started purchasing cow's milk from another local dairy so they could offer cow's milk cheeses in addition to goat's milk cheeses made from their own milk. Predictably, as Blue Ledge grew, Greg and Hannah needed more assistance working the farm and doing cheesemaking. Now they have 8-10 part time employees as part of their team.



Hannah and Greg care deeply about their animals and the land. To help them communicate their good animal husbandry practices and land stewardship to customers, Blue Ledge became "Animal Welfare Approved." The "Animal Welfare Approved by AGW" certification is an independent, nonprofit farm certification program that sets standards for farm practices and animal care, and it requires annual auditing of the farm to assure that all standards are met and maintained.

Hannah sees many risks in being a goat dairy in Vermont. A principal threat is extreme weather events related to climate change. She says that they can't count on what were reliable weather patterns anymore. More frequent heavy rainstorms led to flooding in their barn so that they needed to tear down an old silo and change the roof lines on the barn to make storm water



flow in less destructive directions. Since they make all their own hay, the unpredictable weather made it more difficult to have several days in a row of dry weather at the right time for making quality hay. To deal with this challenge they changed from producing square bales to round bales. This enables them to make all the hay they need more quickly, reducing the duration of clear weather required. Changing to round bales, along with some changes to the structure of their barn, allows them to drive the bales directly into the barn which

gives added efficiency. Also related to flooding, 50 acres of the farm that are part of Vermont's largest system of wetlands are in conservation easement. Because the land isn't developed or farmed, it was able to absorb and hold water during hurricane Irene, helping protect Middlebury from potential catastrophic flooding. Flood protection like this by conserved agricultural lands is emblematic of some of the essential ecosystem services farms can offer their regions.

Blue Ledge Farm realized another major vulnerability last year when the company that connected them with all their wholesale markets decided to discontinue delivering product for the farm. Blue Ledge was not alone in losing this service. In response to losing this delivery option, Blue Ledge scrambled to transition away from direct relationships with individual co-ops and stores.

Instead, they decided to work through distributors who have established relationships and delivery routes and who could consolidate orders, making it worthwhile and profitable to pick up at the farm. Hannah and Greg also started working with food hubs who helped consolidate and distribute products for them. Two of these organizations included the Center for an Agricultural



Economy in Hardwick and more recently with the emerging ACORN food hub in Middlebury. In conjunction with working with the food hubs, Blue Ledge now also sells online and ships direct to customers using refrigerated boxes. While it was hard to lose direct contact with many stores, Hannah says they now feel more resilient with multiple outlets, and they have more time to produce and market their products. Still, Hannah remains aware of the farm's vulnerability if any of their current distributors were to further consolidate.

One of the greatest risks Hannah sees is the trend toward consolidation of all stages in food systems, including production, processing, and marketing. Many dairy producers are vulnerable to decisions made by the processors who handle their milk. A recent example is when Horizon Organic decided to drop dozens of farms in the Northeast in 2021. Blue Ledge

maintains some resilience against large processors and distributors because they control their own production, processing, and marketing.

Loss of other services and supply chain problems have become additional business challenges to overcome. Many agricultural service providers have consolidated, leaving fewer options for farm enterprises. One example is the reduced availability of veterinary services near the farm. There used to be four separate practices in the area and there is now only one. Covid added strain to supply chains and left many businesses understaffed and slow to respond to Blue Ledge's needs. To deal with supply chain backlogs, Greg and Hannah carefully project their future needs and keep at least a month's worth of supplies like product packaging on hand. Covid also radically changed their markets, quickly evaporating much of their cheese sales. As a small producer they were able to quickly pivot to making hard cheeses that store and age well, giving them time to cope with ebbs and flows of the market without losing product. Blue Ledge Farm subscribes to insurance to cover cheese while in their cave, in case of disaster while ageing in the facility. Despite all the challenges brought by the pandemic, 2020 was one of the best years for the farm.



The scale of the business at Blue Ledge is an additional factor that influences risk and resiliency. Since they are big enough to have a number of employees, they have concerns around



availability of labor. But they are small enough that each member of the team plays a valuable role and if even one employee is unable to come to work it can throw off their entire production system. On the other hand, if Hannah or Greg gets sick, they know they have help to get the farm through while they are unable to work. However, Hannah shares that they feel stress wondering what they would do if either of them were out of work for an extended period of time. Regarding distribution and delegation of work on the farm, Hannah shares that one of the most important questions they ask themselves is, "When is it best to do something ourselves versus hiring someone else or

involving another business or supplier?" This question influenced their decision to make all their own hay, but not to do all their own product distribution and delivery. Regularly asking themselves this question helps them to plan the farm for efficiency and reduce risks where possible.



Hannah and Greg look forward to the future of Blue Ledge Farm, with potential for more growth. While not essential to the financial viability of the farm, Greg and Hannah get extra income from selling their paintings, and their daughter has begun operating the spare house on the farm as an Airbnb. It is deeply important to them to keep the business small, and independently owned by a Vermont family. It is possible that their children may want to take over the farm one day.

However, if not, Hannah shares that they wouldn't want to sell the farm business to a large conglomerate which would only contribute to the continued consolidation of food and agriculture. To help support a thriving food system under local control and to benefit our communities, they hope for small farms and food producers throughout Vermont to stay locally operated and independently owned.



*Photos courtesy of Blue Ledge Farm*



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