

Division of Marketing  
Agricultural Development and Diversification (ADD) Program  
1996 Grant Final Report

Grant Number 11035

**Grant Title** Sheep Dairying; Sheep Milk Yogurt as a Viable Economic Enterprise  
for Wisconsin Dairies

**Amount Awarded** \$14,816.00

**Name** Bill and Janet Butler

**Organization** Butler Farms, L.L.C.  
Whitehall

**E-Mail**

**WEB**

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## SHEEP DAIRYING: SHEEP MILK YOGURT AS A VIABLE ECONOMIC ENTERPRISE FOR WISCONSIN DAIRIES

NAME: Janet and Bill Butler

### FINAL REPORT

#### Project Summary:

a. This project was designed to test the hypothesis that small sheep dairy producers are benefited in finding market acceptance for their products by expanding the product line available to consumers and therefore expand the potential for sheep dairying in the state. Although sheep dairying is in its infancy in the United States, there are more sheep being milked in the world than dairy cows. Wisconsin has taken the lead in sheep dairying in the United States. During the past year the University of Wisconsin's Spooner Research Station has achieved wonderful results from their dairy sheep, and this year also saw the continued expansion of a producer cooperative to market sheep milk from Wisconsin producers.

The project enabled our farm to expand our yogurt line to include a larger sized container of plain yogurt, thereby meeting a consumer demand, as well as begin production of a berry flavored yogurt, to also meet a consumer demand for a naturally sweetened yogurt. By such a utilization of grant monies we had hoped to:

1. Continue to expand the growing field of sheep dairying in the state.
2. Develop a new agricultural product.
3. Expand the market for our products.
4. Make efficient use of farm land.

b. We believe the that project has enabled our farm to meet the following results during the past year:

1. Continue to expand the growing field of sheep dairying in the state. Due to the expansion of our operation based on this project, we are now in the position to purchase sheep milk from other Wisconsin producers. We recently became licensed to receive Grade A milk, and the Spooner Station became a patron of our dairy plant this August. We will also be in a position to purchase milk from another Grade A facility that is setting up in the Strum area. By creating an additional buyer of raw sheep milk, there is a diminished dependence on one or two processors of sheep milk products.

2. Through the use of grant funds we have been able to add two new products to our production. One is the larger sized container of plain yogurt; available now in 16 oz. containers. We will also have available a berry flavored yogurt. This yogurt will be available as soon as our new cups are received.

3. Through the addition of our new products, we have attracted new buyers for our products. We are currently negotiating with a distributor out of Michigan for sale of

our 16 oz. plain yogurt. These larger sized containers are appealing to a large ethnic market that utilizes plain yogurt in cooking.

4. By continuing to expand our sales, we have been able to efficiently use our farm land. We are in the process of being certified organic, and have used this past year to further enhance our fields through the use of rotational grazing, and organic fertilizing. We are now also only using organic certified feeds for our milking flock, so that we hope to be able to offer consumers a certified organic product within the next few years. We believe that using these kinds of farming practices helps enrich our farm lands as well as providing consumers with a healthy product.

c. It is difficult to measure the benefits of a project. We believe the support the ADD program offers to small farmers and producers is crucial to our survival in such a competitive market. Our original expectations were that the new products would be quickly developed. It has of course taken longer to achieve success than we had hoped. Finding the appropriate machinery, developing a new flavor, doing a nutritional analysis and designing cups takes time. However, in the end what counts is the project was successfully completed, and our farm and sheep dairying continues to grow.

d. This project has given us a forum for providing information to the public about sheep farming and sheep dairy products. We have received a great deal of media attention, including a news spot on an Eau Claire TV station, as well as feature articles in the Country Today, the Agri-View, the Wisconsin State Journal, the Madison Magazine, and the Trempealeau REC News. We have also been able to present our farm directly, in Farmer's Markets every week both in Madison and Minneapolis. This exposure has been invaluable in educating consumers about small farms, helping them to become more connected with their food source. What we hear over and over again is that consumers want to support local producers as well as having a healthy food source. We feel thankful that we are able to be a part of this.

e. Through the receipt of grant funds we have been able to continue to expand our small operation through two new value added products. We hope to be able to continue to grow, add employees to our operation, support more sheep dairies in the state, and offer our products to a larger portion of the US. We will be traveling to the Chicago area in the fall, and that is the next area we hope to be able to provide product to. Without the wonderful support we have received from the State of Wisconsin, these endeavors would not be possible.



Whitehall, Wisconsin 54773  
(715) 983-2285

It is difficult to accurately assess the full economic impact of the ADD Grant project that we received. With additional funds our farm operation was able to develop two new products which are just now being put on the market. We believe that although it has not yet directly contributed to more jobs for our farm, it has increased the potential for the sheep dairy industry to grow and thrive. We are now in the position of being able to support other new sheep dairies in the state by purchasing their milk. In that way the economic benefit is spread among many farm families. What is also important to note is that without this grant, it is questionable whether we would have been able to maintain our farmstead operation. If starting up a new operation with, the support we have received from this program has been critical to our growing success. We enthusiastically support it, and hope that it will be able to help other small producers as it has helped us.

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# To New milk products expected to help lift sheep farmers

Wisconsin's sheep dairying got a boost when a Whitehall sheep farm created two new products and started buying milk from other sheep dairies under a grant from the state's Agricultural Development and Diversification program.

"Wisconsin has taken the lead in sheep dairying in the United States," said Mark Liedl, marketing division administrator with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, which oversees the ADD program.

"We invested just under \$15,000 in a project that created new products to meet consumer demand, provided an outlet for other farms' sheep milk, and promises to add jobs and strengthen Wisconsin's leadership position in the sheep industry," he said.

Bill and Janet Butler of Whitehall received \$14,800 to test their theory that small sheep dairy producers could break into the market by expanding their product lines. At the same time they expanded the potential for more sheep dairying.

In one year, they:

- Added to their product line 16-ounce containers of plain yogurt that appeal particularly to an ethnic market using sheep milk yogurt in cooking, and 8-ounce containers of berry flavored yogurt.
- Began buying sheep milk from other Wisconsin producers, including the Spooner Agricultural Research Station and several other Grade A sheep farms. This has diminished sheep farmers' dependence on one or two processors.
- Attracted new buyers, particularly through the Madison and Minneapolis farmers markets, and are negotiating with a Michigan distributor. "What we hear over and over again is that consumers want to support local producers as well as having a healthy food source," the Butlers' report to the department says. "By expanding our sales, we have been able to efficiently use our farmland." For information about the ADD grant program, call Mike Bandli, (608)224-5136.

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The Edgerton Reporter

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## 106 Sheep milk yogurt offers new profits

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For more information about the ADD grant program, call Mike Bandli, 608-224-5136. For more information about the Butlers' operation, call 715-983-2285.



Bill Butler, a former computer systems analyst from Albany, N.Y., feeds some of his milking sheep on his farm near Whitehall.

## Sheep milking is little-known farm specialty

By Rick Barrett  
Agribusiness reporter

**B**ill Butler gets some odd looks when he tells people that he milks sheep for a living.

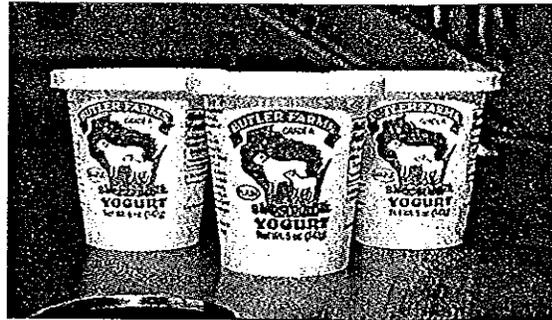
"They wrinkle up their noses," Butler said. "People have a lot of preconceived notions about sheep's milk, even if they haven't tried it."

Butler, from Whitehall, is one of 16 sheep dairy farmers in Wisconsin. He and his wife, Jan Butler, have one of the state's two farmer-owned sheep's-milk cheese and yogurt processing plants.

Although sheep dairying is small in Wisconsin — barely a blip on the total dairy production radar screen — the state is a leader in the field.

That's because there are only about 55 sheep dairy farms in the entire United States. Wisconsin is the No. 1 sheep dairying state, ahead of California and New York, Minnesota, North Dakota, Utah and Idaho.

"Sheep dairying is in its infancy in this country . . . taking



Photos/CATHY ACHERMAN

baby steps," said Dave Thomas, professor of sheep genetics at UW-Madison.

Sheep, unlike cows, only give milk about 140 days a year. The amount each ewe gives per milking is small, too — only about 1.5 pounds, compared with about 30 pounds from a Holstein.

Sheep's milk is used primarily in specialty cheeses, such as feta and Romano, although some is used in yogurt and is blended with cow's milk in other dairy products.

"The milk is sweet and very creamy," said Diane Kauf-

# Sheep

Continued from Page 1F

mann, owner of the SunDance Farm near Chippewa Falls.

The Butlers began milking sheep seven years ago on their small farm near Albany, N.Y. At the time, they were among the first sheep dairy farmers in the Northeast.

"We kept our regular jobs," Bill Butler, a computer systems analyst, said. "Back then it was a hobby farm in sprawling suburbia."

In 1993, the Butlers moved to Whitehall, north of La Crosse. They have devoted almost all of their time to sheep dairying, although Jan Butler works part time as a social worker and restaurant manager.



**HELP:** If you are interested in learning more about sheep dairying, a good source is Professor Dave Thomas at UW-Madison. His telephone number is (608) 263-4306.

"We thought if we were going to farm, this was it," Bill Butler said. "Farming was on the way out where we lived in New York."

Today the Butlers have 225 sheep, plus their own milk processing facility. They buy milk from other sheep farmers and a UW agricultural research station at Spooner.

The price farmers receive for sheep's milk is about \$65 per hundred pounds, compared to about \$13 per hundred pounds for cow's milk.

The downside is you have to milk a lot of sheep and make your money during nine months of the year.

A sheep dairy farmer with 200 sheep, working 40 hours per week, could earn \$25,000 a year after expenses, Thomas of UW-Madison's Thomas said.

"That's a conservative figure," he said. "The market will support that income now, and sheep milk prices ought to remain steady for quite some time."

A lack of sheep's milk processors, past import restrictions on European milking sheep, and a lack of knowledge, have kept the

number of farmers to a barely recognizable level in this country.

"I don't see a rash of people getting into this industry," Thomas said. "But I don't see it as a flash in the pan either. It will grow slowly and steadily."

The Butlers, besides raising sheep and processing the milk, spend a lot of time building markets for their products. They received a \$14,800 grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture to help pay for the efforts.

Currently, the Butlers have sheep's cheese and yogurt in stores in Madison, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. They are trying to find a distributor in Chicago.

"That would give us a big shot in the arm," Bill Butler said. "Chicago has larger ethnic markets that are familiar with sheep's milk."

Sheep are docile animals that are easy to milk and generally easy to take care of. They readily adapt to northwestern Wisconsin's rugged terrain and cold winters.

Sheep are milked in parlors using equipment similar to dairy parlor equipment, but on a smaller scale.

"The hardest thing about milking sheep is teaching them to go into the parlor," Bill Butler said. "But sheep truly do follow their leader. Once you train a few of them, the rest is easy. And it's a heck of a lot easier to push a sheep around than a cow. With a sheep, you can almost pick the animal up and move it."

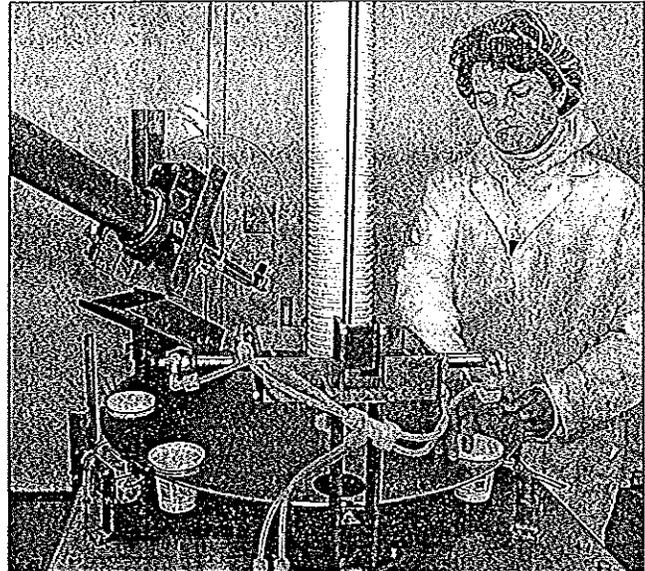
At Sun Dance Farm, Diane Kaufmann milks 72 sheep. Her husband, Greg, is a Lutheran minister in Chippewa Falls.

"When we are milking, it's a pretty intense schedule, about six hours a day," Diane Kaufmann said. "But this time of the year it's very simple. I probably spend 45 minutes or an hour taking care of the sheep."

Kaufmann is confident that the market for sheep's milk is growing, and that more processors will get into the business. Currently, besides the Butlers' facility, there are only a handful of other processors in the state.

Sheep farmers supplement their incomes with sales of lamb meat and wool.

But the price of wool, about 40 cents a pound, barely pays the shearing costs. One Green Bay sheep farmer recently used his



Photos/CATHY ACHERMAN

Jan Butler makes yogurt from sheep's milk. Sheep are only milked about nine months of the year. Some milk is frozen and stored for processing during the off season.

## Highest producing sheep? East Friesians, of course

East Friesians are considered to be the world's highest producing dairy sheep.

They are highly specialized animals from the Friesian region of Europe that extends along the North Sea coast westward from the Weser River in Germany, along the north coast of the Netherlands and Belgium.

The same region is home to the

Holstein breed of dairy cattle.

Until recently, U.S. government restrictions made it difficult to import Friesian sheep genetics. But those rules have been relaxed, and more Friesians are being used in the fledgling U.S. sheep dairying industry.

Friesians don't fare well in hot environments, but they do well in moderate and cold climates.

flocks' wool to insulate his house, rather than sell it at a depressed price.

The price of lambs is much better, about \$100 per animal.

"There's a nationwide shortage of lambs, so most people predict the prices will remain high for several years," Thomas said.

Thomas grew up on a farm near Mineral Point that had sheep, but farmers didn't milk them then.

"We had never heard of such a thing," Thomas said. "We would have thought it was silly."

But the United States is importing several million dollars worth of sheep's milk a year, mostly from England and France.

Today, Thomas is bullish on sheep dairying. A farmer, he said, can get started with 200 ewes and milking equipment costing a total of about \$35,000.

"The people out there now are pioneers," Thomas said. "But I am optimistic about the future of sheep dairying."

# Splash in stores



Associated Press

New York. The clothing in the boutique

cruited popular 90s designers, including Victor Costa, Nicole Miller, Tahari and Jill Stuart, to develop Evita-inspired clothes. The merchandise includes a \$720 brown dress with fake fur around the neck and \$108 lace camisoles.

"We're not trying to copy what's in the film, just use that basis for a feminine look that's accessorized and polished," said Kal Ruttenstein, senior vice president for fashion direction at New York-

based Bloomingdale's.

Also following the Evita trend is the designer who helped mold her style in the 1940s. Christian Dior developed a costume jewelry line with Evita overtones, including \$85 door-knocker earrings and an \$850 crystal necklace.

Estee Lauder also came out with Evita makeup, featuring dark lines with lots of reds, and Via Spiga has shoes resembling the styles from half a century ago.

"Not as flashy as I thought it would be," said Lisa Schwartz, who was checking out a simple Tahari suit at Bloomingdale's. "There is some stuff that I'd definitely fit into my wardrobe."

And that may be the only way today's women will buy into the Evita craze. Other movie-inspired trends were easily devoured by consumers — the oversized men's wear from "Annie Hall," the sweatshirt and leggings attire from "Flashdance," and the hip-teen look from "Clueless."

But 1990s shoppers may be less willing to part with their jeans and sweaters to slip into a ruffled blouse or a fitted dress.

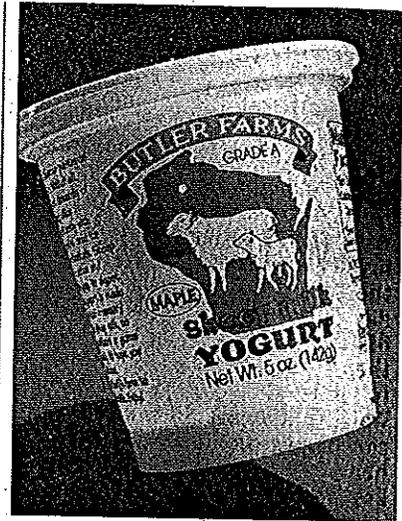
"We have gone through the casualization of the American workplace and women just don't wear structured-boned clothes anymore," said Cindy Weber Cleary, senior fashion editor at Glamour magazine.

"But many women may incorporate some of the styles, like open toe shoes, pearl choker necklaces and red lipsticks, into their everyday styles," she said.

■ **Actually, the real Evita was even flashier than the movie portrays her/ Showcase, 1F**

■ **Beanie Babies alert:** I can't guarantee that by the time you read this column there will be a Wrinkles left, but Linda Stuesser at Whoops! And Co., 7416 Mineral Point Road in Cambridge Court Shopping Center, received a major shipment on Friday. Another, even bigger order is expected at the beginning of the week. A shipment of 600 received earlier in the week went to customers on a waiting list or a few lucky shoppers who just happened into the store on Thursday when what was left of that order

*Do you know of a new retail business opening or changing addresses? Have a retail-related question or comment? Contact Shop Talk by writing Genie Campbell at The Wisconsin State Journal, P.O. Box 8058, Madison, Wi., 53708; faxing information to her through 238-6072 or e-mailing GenieCamp@aol.com.*



## Say Baaaa . . . yogurt

The folks at Danon and Breyer yogurt companies don't have to run for cover, but if they look over their shoulders they might see sheep.

Bill and Jan Butler of Trempealeau County recently started making yogurt from sheep's milk. Their sales have tripled this year to about \$15,000.

Butler Farm yogurt is very rich and thick and comes in two flavors: plain and maple sugar.

The Butlers have the only Grade-A sheep's milk dairy in the United States, according to United States Department of Agriculture officials.

Milk for the yogurt comes from their own animals and a small growing cooperative of Wisconsin farmers.

To meet increasing demand, the Butlers have hired a yogurt distributor in Minneapolis. They plan to add new flavors in 1997.

"We're hoping to expand into the Chicago market because no one else from Wisconsin is selling sheep's yogurt there," Bill Butler said.

Sheep milk's yogurt has 1.5 times more calcium than cow's milk yogurt.

"We're keeping it 100 percent natural. When we add flavors, they won't be artificial," Bill Butler said.

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