



The *New* American Farmer

Richard and Peggy Sechrist

Fredericksburg, Texas

Summary of Operation

- *50-head organic beef cattle herd and 300 organic pastured chickens per month*

Problems Addressed

Aversion to agri-chemicals. After setting a goal of having a chemical-free ranch, partly because family members had suffered chemical sensitivities, Richard and Peggy Sechrist developed organic enterprises and marketing channels that would financially reward their choice.

Low prices. By selling their products as certified organic, adding value to their products and creating a regional marketing system that is friendlier to small producers, they hope to sustain their own ranch as well as those of like-minded neighbors.

Background

Deep in south central Texas, where drought can squeeze the life out of the most promising dreams, Richard and Peggy Sechrist have been building an oasis of sustainability on Richard's family ranch.

It is befitting that Richard met Peggy while attending a Holistic Management® class she was teaching in 1994; they credit Holistic Management® as key to their accomplishments. After they married late in 1994, the Sechrist's went through a process of setting three-part holistic goals for their ranch. Richard says it was critical to their day-to-day work because now every decision has a clear foundation.

"Our initial goal concerned quality of life values," Peggy says. "One of the highest priorities was to be chemical free since both our families have experienced chemical sensitivities."

Focal Point of Operation — Managed grazing, marketing of cattle and poultry

The Sechrist's established a management-intensive grazing system for cattle in their dry, brittle environment. They use all organic practices for herd health and low-stress handling techniques. They've added pastured poultry and egg production to the ranch, and are working with a local, family-owned processing plant where they can cut up chickens and process beef. Their ranch was the first to be certified organic by the Texas Department of Agriculture, and their poultry and beef are certified organic by Quality Certification Services.

To market their products — and those of neighboring ranchers raising organic meat — they created a separate company called Homestead Healthy Foods. They've built and maintained a customer base of about 1,000 by direct sales through their web site and via wholesale channels such as four natural food distributors and several retail stores in central Texas. They also set up a booth at food specialty events.

Their accomplishments so far are a testimony to hard work and planning built on a shared vision. "We are constantly looking at our business from a holistic point of view and evaluating it against our values and ecological factors, as well as traditional criteria such as profit and growth," Peggy says.

The yearly average rainfall of 26 inches can come in short bursts in between long dry spells. The

Sechrists work within the dry cycles by maintaining their pastures in native grasses. Richard says the native grasses have a high protein content — as high as 17 percent when green, retaining 7 to 9 percent in the winter. The condition of the forage dictates the size of the annual herd.

They graze three herds of cattle — one-year-olds, two-year-olds and a cow-calf herd — in a planned rotational approach.

“It’s not just an every-few-days you-move-’em system,” Richard says. Instead, rotations are based on a sophisticated system of monitoring plant growth and recovery. They concentrate on building a healthy pasture “community” that supports microbes, earthworms and diverse plant life.

The cattle are entirely grass-fed. “As we have learned more about the changes that grain causes in cattle metabolism — causing them to lower their pH and lose their ability to digest forage well — we have significantly reduced the amount of supplemental feed,” Peggy says. They use alfalfa hay if they need a supplement, and carefully plan and monitor grazing to limit the times the cattle need anything other than minerals.

After a one-time vaccination for Blackleg, their cattle don’t get any antibiotics or synthetic treatments. “Our basic herd health is excellent,” Peggy says, adding that the local vet is amazed. “He feels that our pasture management is the most important factor.”

Cattle, both steers and heifers, are slaughtered for market at about 1,000 to 1,100 pounds.

The Sechrists added pastured poultry to their ranch after an 18-month stretch without any precipitation. They figured that the size of their cattle herd will always be limited by rainfall, but their land can support

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more poultry. Richard says the chickens are like an insurance policy for drought.

They started with 200 chickens per month, slowly expanded to about 750, then cut back again to 300 a month while they sought a reliable source of organic feed. After experimenting with rectangular, moveable pens, they built a hoop house from a modified greenhouse frame. Cooled by fans and encircled with electric poultry netting for outside grazing, the hoop house both keeps the chickens at a more temperate climate and protects them from predators. They move the house with a truck or tractor to minimize the flock’s impact on the pasture.

As innovative as the Sechrists are in their production practices, they seem to really relish the challenges of marketing. They sell their beef in individual, frozen cuts. “That protects our customers and provides us with a longer sell time,” Peggy says.

Richard’s son, Dan, set up a computer program that they use to calculate their rate of return based on margins, pricing and volume for any combination of cuts. They keep their markets balanced, but continue to monitor closely.

Currently, they only sell their chickens whole and frozen. Although demand for whole birds is increasing faster than they can increase production, Peggy and Richard decided they need to offer more choices in

chicken, too.

They explored the possibility of building their own USDA-inspected processing plant, then discovered that a family-owned plant 30 miles away was begging for business. The Sechrists made an agreement with the owners of that plant to have all their processing done there. This will allow them to sell chicken breasts separately, as well as create a prepared food from the other parts of the birds.

Although they initially built their business on direct sales, they found it difficult to reach the volume they needed to turn a profit. They decided to develop a label that would differentiate their products and bring a premium.

They first tried a label specifying that they were “chemical-free,” but wholesale buyers didn’t understand the difference from “natural beef,” so they were reluctant to buy. In early 1999, when the USDA ruled that meat could be labeled organic, they finally had the marketing tool they needed.

Peggy stresses that the move from direct marketing to wholesaling is still based on Holistic Management® goals. “We are not interested in becoming another national beef company,” she says. “We want to build and serve a regional market, because that is our vision of a sustainable market.”

Economics and Profitability

Asked whether their changes in production practices and organic certification have increased the profitability of their ranch, Peggy responds positively. “Definitely,” she says. “We are right at the point of cash flowing and reaching profitability.”

The reasons for their economic success? Having their own website to consistently reach the local retail market, taking advantage of a booming wholesale market for their chickens and selling their beef through the health food distributors.

It has been a challenge to educate consumers about their production practices and the difference in their products. Yet once educated, consumer demand for organic and grass-fed, free-range meat is strong. The Sechrists experienced a surge of business after news of Mad Cow-infected beef.

Environmental Benefits

The Sechrists’ production practices have maintained productivity of their pastures and increased soil biota despite drought and a fragile environment. They use no synthetic

fertilizers or pest controls.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Despite working ceaseless hours, Richard and Peggy have been more than willing to share information with other producers at workshops and conferences, and serve on leadership and advisory committees to sustainable agricultural programs, including SARE.

Yet, the workload has a down side. “The work required to develop this business has been tremendous and unreasonable,” Peggy says. “We probably would not have followed through if we were just trying to make a buck. But our business is built on our vision of developing a sustainable business, helping develop a sustainable and regional food system, and expanding consumer awareness about the need for sustainable communities.”

Transition Advice

“Plan on a slow process,” Peggy advises. Producers should try something on an affordable scale, learn from their experiences and adapt.

“You need to be clear on what you are trying to accomplish,” Richard says. “If organic isn’t part of your value system, then maybe you shouldn’t move your farm or ranch toward organic production. Your work has to be more than just a means to making money.”

The Future

Peggy and Richard feel largely satisfied with their beef production. Since they reduced their herd to 50, they have, to some extent, developed a drought-tolerant herd. On the other hand, not all of their rangeland receives hoof impact. Richard hopes to create smaller pasture areas in the future.

As they develop a pastured poultry system that is more streamlined and less labor-intensive, they would like to increase their production to 2,000 birds per month.

Their biggest plans, though, lie in the area of marketing. With a marketplace so controlled by major corporations, they hope to create an alternative marketing network that is more farmer-friendly.

As the Sechrists enter the wholesale market more aggressively, they will continue to sell direct via their website. This will keep them in contact with the feedback of consumers, and also satisfy their vision of creating local food security.

■ *Keith Richards*

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Peggy Jones

Richard and Peggy Sechrist sell their organic beef and poultry under their own label, Homestead Healthy Foods, wholesale and retail over the Internet.