



Life in the Slow Lane: Raising Pastured Livestock on Norton Creek Farm

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The Northwest Direct farm case studies were developed to provide in-depth information about the direct and semi-direct marketing opportunities that exist for farmers within their regional food system and how these opportunities are captured by a diverse set of successful producers in Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Direct marketing strategies employed by the farmers featured in this series include farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), u-pick, farm stand and on-farm sales. Semi-direct marketing strategies include sales to restaurants, caterers, retailers (grocery stores, butchers, etc.) and processors, arranged and completed by the farmer him/herself without the use of brokers or wholesalers.

In 2002 and 2003, members of the case study research team performed in-depth on-farm interviews with each of the 12 farm families in this study. Interviews were transcribed, financial information was collected, reviewed and interpreted and outlines for the case study content were developed. Professionals were hired to write the case studies. Each case study went through a series of reviews by the case study farmers, university faculty and research team members with final permission for publishing and distribution given by the farmers themselves.

The nature of profitable small acreage farming demands flexibility and the willingness to change. These case studies, therefore, reflect a "snapshot in time" of each farm. Readers should be aware that these farms have undoubtedly evolved since the initial interviews. They should also be aware that the unique nature of each farm necessitates an individualized treatment of the analysis of farm profitability and the criteria by which that is measured. The case studies contain financial information to the extent that farmers were willing to share, and reflect our intention to educate the reader, while at the same time protecting the farmers' need for confidentiality.

It is our intent that the case studies will be of use to:

- Current farmers who want access to a greater share of the revenue that comes from the foods they grow and raise and are interested in exploring one or more marketing options.
- New farmers who are designing their production and marketing systems, who are interested in employing one or more marketing strategies, and are establishing a business plan for their farm.
- Educators and other agricultural professionals who work with producers and others interested in direct and semi-direct marketing.
- Policy-makers who are interested in enhancing the financial stability of family farms in the region through innovative policy and government funding.

A total of 12 case studies were produced by Rural Roots, Inc. and the University of Idaho as part of the Northwest Direct project. A list of the other case studies in the series is included at the end of this document. These case studies are one component of a larger USDA Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems project called *Northwest Direct: Improving Markets for Small Farms*. For more information on this project and its outcomes, visit the project website at <http://www.nwdirect.wsu.edu/>.



Colette DePhelps, NW Direct Case Study Research Team Leader



**Karen Black and Robert
Plamondon**
Norton Creek Farm
Blodgett, Oregon

Marketing Strategies Employed

Farmers' Markets
Sales to Retailers

Primary Products

Free Range Eggs
Pastured Broilers
Pastured Stew Chickens
Pastured Turkeys
Pastured Pork
Pastured Lamb

Other Enterprises

Norton Creek Press

Website: <http://www.plamondon.com>

**NORTHWEST DIRECT
MARKETING
FARMER CASE STUDY**

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Life in the Slow Lane: Raising Pastured Livestock on Norton Creek Farm

Farm Overview & History

You can imagine the headline: "Farming Emancipates Engineers from the 'Silicon Mines' of California!" Karen Black and Robert Plamondon left the Bay Area of California, and the world of high tech engineering, in 1995. They bought their 37 acre farm outside of Blodgett Oregon out of a desire to provide their young sons with what they considered to be a more "real and significant" lifestyle. Plamondon, who grew up in rural California, wished to recreate some of the good memories of his upbringing for his young sons.

In the years that followed, Plamondon and Black severed ties to their previous employers and went into farming full time. Their lush Norton Valley property had been farmed for generations, and when they purchased it, Black says, "We looked at this big chunk of land, and said, 'Gee, what are we going to do with all of this?'And we thought it would be a pity...to not do any farming on it." In the

beginning, they boarded some goats, then got interested in chickens. They started selling free range eggs, then raised broilers, and eventually built their own processing facility. Later, they expanded into turkey, pork and lamb production. Plamondon has also applied his skills as a technical writer to author and reprint books about poultry farming, and publish them through their enterprise, Norton Creek Press.

Norton Creek Farm, named for the creek that bisects it, consists of 37 acres of Coastal Rangeland. The property was clear cut in the late 1800s for a narrow gauge rail line, and farmed for many generations. The house and barn on the property were built in the '40s. Buildings on the property also include the processing facility, portable chicken houses and other out-buildings. A network of electrified fencing provides pastured animals with protection from predation. There are also garden spaces for the family's personal use.



Ladies in red: Black and Plamondon's New Hampshire Red hens.



Robert Plamondon with chickens and goats on pasture.

The climate on the farm is mild, with three to five snowy days annually. There is ample rain, mainly in the winter, which allows for year-round grass and supports a strong dairy and poultry industry in the region. The creek sometimes floods during the rainy season, and in the summer Black and Plamondon have to haul water for the animals. But generally, the climate is quite amenable to their chosen enterprises.

“(W)e were...hip deep in eggs. So we started going to the Farmers’ Market in self-defense.”

Their interest in chickens started in 1996, with the purchase of 25 chicks. Plamondon then purchased more birds from Oregon State University. Soon, Karen Black explains, “we were...hip deep in eggs. So we started going to the Farmers’ market in self-defense.”

In 1998, Black read Joe Salatin’s book, *Pastured Poultry Profits*. It was at this point that she became interested in broiler chickens, and started raising Cornish Crosses. She started with just a few, and butchered and sold the birds on site. When this experiment yielded adequate consumer attention, Black and Plamondon built their facility, poetically named the “Poultry Processing Palace.” The addition of this structure gave them the ability to apply for a poultry and rabbit license from the state. Then they were able to sell poultry, in addition to their eggs, at the Farmers’ markets.

While they considered the addition of the processing facility to be a significant financial investment, Black says that they had frequent contact with the Oregon Department

of Agriculture during this time and their experience with the regulatory agencies has been very positive. She says that “they’re very, very helpful and supportive.”

It is, in fact, one of the strengths of the proprietors of Norton Creek Farm, that they are willing and able to use the resources that are out there. While Karen Black was busy learning the hands on skills for raising and butchering birds, Plamondon was researching the science of raising pastured poultry and applying techniques that he once called “so old fashioned, they’re avant-garde,” in a Norton Creek Farm Newsletter article. This research, much of it dating back to the early 20th century, helped them develop their farming methods, and now Plamondon has made it his mission to disseminate this information by reprinting some of the original out of print texts through Norton Creek Press, as well as authoring his own “how-to” book, *Success with Baby Chicks*. Plamondon also spreads the good news about poultry-raising through his website (<http://www.plamondon.com>), and through an e-newsletter with a readership of about 3000 people.

The farmers use goats for weed management on the property, and their primary enterprise is raising the chickens but Black and Plamondon have also added pasture raised turkeys, pigs, and lambs to their repertoire. They sell the turkeys at Thanksgiving, and pigs are available in August and October. Folks have to preorder the turkey and pork. Black says that the lambs have been the most difficult to raise, and therefore may be discontinued in the future.

Marketing

Norton Creek Farm sells its eggs through four retail outlets- three in Corvallis and one in Blodgett. These markets sell a variety of egg brands, so Black and Plamondon try to ensure that their eggs are well-labeled with their Norton Creek label and stamp, and in good supply. Wholesale price at the markets is 80% of retail. They spend very little on promotional materials, and only occasionally do store demos. Mostly their reputation is spread word of mouth. But Black isn’t concerned about the egg competition in the retail markets. She says that people know their reputation for quality eggs, and are willing to pay premium price even when others are undercutting them, adding “I would rather be the high-price leader and be able to back it up by saying (what) makes our eggs...better.”

Their Farmers’ market sales, however, have a more intentional marketing focus. Black and Plamondon make sure that they “look the part” of the farmer, and wear appropriate clothing. Here, they sell eggs, chicken, and pre-ordered turkey, pork and lamb. Meats are delivered fresh on ice. They use a stuffed chicken in their display to advertise their products, since eggs and meats are kept in coolers and are not in plain sight. Black says, “We have a lot of pictures

and text on our stand from newspaper articles written about us....” Norton Creek Farm sells at the Saturday and Wednesday Farmers’ markets in Corvallis, and Plamondon’s mother sells eggs for them at the Thursday McMinnville Market. The Saturday market is their biggest egg sales venue, where they can sell 90-95 dozen eggs in a market day. At the Wednesday market, they sell 30-40 dozen.

Having the dual market for egg sales has been an essential financial strategy for the farmers. The Farmers’ markets provide an excellent sales venue during peak production season, allowing Black and Plamondon to move a large quantity of eggs to a loyal customer base while building name recognition for their other products. The Corvallis market runs from mid-April to late November. In the winter, when production is lower, their arrangements with the local grocery stores provides essential off-season income.

Egg sales are the entry point for building relationships with customers. Plamondon says, “Basically, once (customers) like something of yours, they’ll buy something else of yours....I think eggs are a wonderful opening product for the Farmers’ market because people take a chance with \$3.00 for a dozen eggs. And then if they think it’s really great, then it’s \$250.00 for a half a pig, in like one step.”

Norton Creek Farm does not hold any organic certifications. Plamondon and Black say that their customers do not demand this. Customers want to know about pastured animals, and about whether or not the animals are treated with antibiotics, and whether or not the animals are fed animal by-products. Once Plamondon and Black explain the production methods on their farm, most customers are satisfied.

Black and Plamondon have created an attractive brochure which describes farm philosophy and production



methods, and includes a production calendar and order form. Plamondon’s website and Norton Creek Press enterprise provide further visibility for the farm. And Black is proactive in generating coverage in the local paper, by suggesting article topics to its editor, such as how lovely brown eggs are, when dyed for Easter.

Effects of Marketing Strategies on Production Techniques

Robert Plamondon’s research has unearthed a wealth of turn of the century poultry farming techniques that has served his farm well. He and Karen Black use the “Petaluma System” of poultry management that made Petaluma, California famous for its egg production. Plamondon has an article on this production method on the web at <http://www.plamondon.com/sare.pdf>, and facets of it are listed in Figure 1. The Petaluma system is based on utilizing pastures in an integrated manner by running ruminants on the same pasture as chickens to control weeds, using portable houses to provide a continual source of grasses, and using manure to increase the overall fertility of the property. Plamondon’s web-based educational outreach promotes sustainable farming practices and makes the Norton Creek Farm name accessible to millions of people interested in farming and finding sustainably produced food.

Figure 1: Topics from *Mixing Free Range Hens and Ruminants on Pasture* by Robert Plamondon (<http://www.plamondon.com/sare.pdf>).



Qualities of Free Range Eggs



“Excellent Cash Flow—Something to Sell Every Day”



“Low Initial Investment”



How the “Petaluma System” Works
“Heavy labor is shunned.”



How To Create Houses and Feed Areas.



Overcoming Problems



Pasture Management



“Getting Started”



“Recommended Reading”

Broilers

Karen Black started her broiler research by purchasing 25 Cornish Cross and 25 Red Broilers. Using side by side comparison, Black found that the Cornish Cross was the superior bird in terms of feed conversion. She says that the "...Cornish Cross ate more, grew faster, and...weighed more when I butchered them....So that's why I've stuck with the Cornish Cross."

In 2004, Norton Creek farm raised approximately 1600 broilers, in batches of 100. The first batch arrived in March, with new batches arriving every two weeks. Broiler chicks are purchased locally and fed grain and non-medicated feed mix in separate feeders so they can self-select for energy vs. protein needs. Chicks are then transitioned from the brooder to the pasture. Norton Creek farm has enough acreage to run poultry in a particular pasture only once a year. This once a year rotation ensures there is plenty of grass, and pastures are not depleted. Broilers become available at the Farmers' markets in mid-April through November.

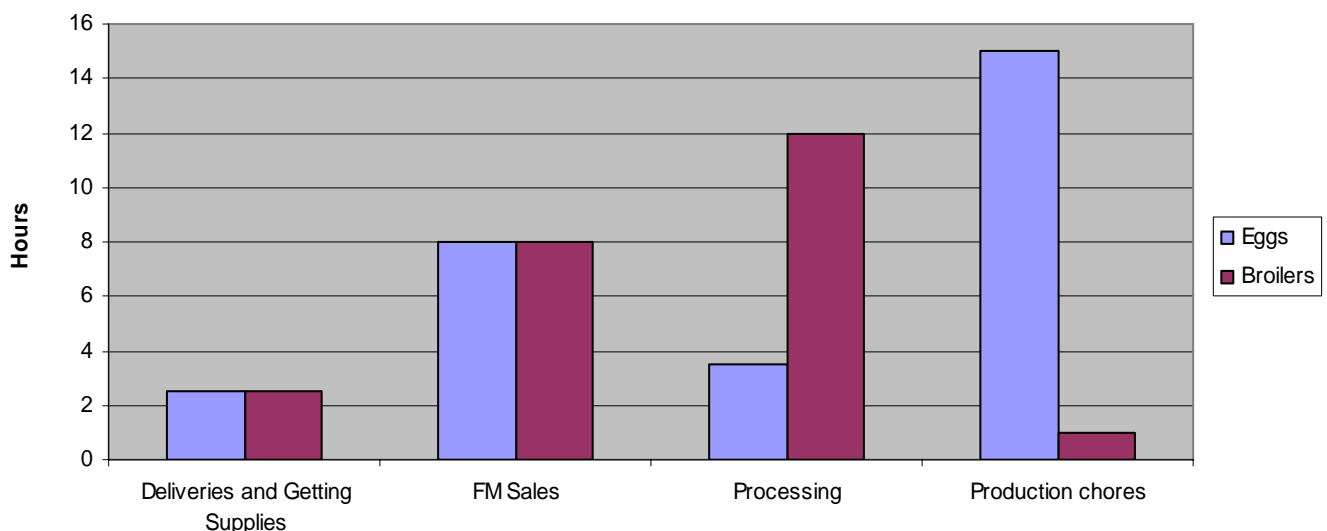
Black spends about 23.5 hours per week on the broiler enterprise (see Figure 2.) The labor involved in processing the broilers is intensive, and the initial investment in equipment and the facility is significant. The design for the processing facility came from the Pickwick-Zesco website, and was im-

proved upon by Black and Plamondon. In compliance with processing regulations, the facility has a "dirty" side for the prepping and plucking of birds, and a "clean" side for handling the meat. Black began her education in butchering by reading up on the subject matter, then by helping out at a nearby poultry farm. Here, she learned to use the equipment, and about sequencing work flow. Then she practiced on her own, trying out different cuts and developing an efficient technique. Finally she says, "(Y)ou know, (butchering) something like 5,000 birds has taught me a lot about butchering birds." After about 1,000 hours of practice, Black says that she could call herself "pretty competent." She butchers 8-10 broilers per hour on Tuesday and Friday, in preparation for the Wednesday and Saturday markets. Plamondon says that butchering is about half of the labor in raising the pastured broilers.

With this level of processing on-farm, Black and Plamondon have had to develop a sustainable plan for dealing with waste from the butchering process. They estimate that they generate two 5 gallon buckets of viscera, feathers and feet per butchering day. When asked what is done with this waste, Black replied, "I'm the compost queen of Benton County." By mixing the waste with wood chips gleaned from obliging road crews, they have developed a composting system that responsibly manages waste.

"Heavy labor is shunned."

Figure 2: Work Hours Per Week by Task- Chickens, 2003





Pullets

In a typical year, there are 560-600 pullets on pasture. Pullet chicks are given an anti-coccidiosis medicated feed while they are in the brooder for six to eight weeks. After this, they are able to develop immunity without getting sick, and are transitioned to a non-medicated feed. The birds are often purchased from OSU. Black and Plamondon estimate that they spend approximately 29 hours per week on the egg production enterprise (see Figure 2.) Eggs are collected twice a day, at 10:00 am and at 4:00 pm. They are refrigerated and then batches are run through the egg washer, the Aquamagic, after the 4:00 pm collection, two to three times per week. The egg washer also grades and weighs the eggs.

Spring marks the height of production, with the hens laying approximately 25 dozen eggs per day. Winter production drops to about 10 to 15 dozen a day. In August or September, Black checks for hens that are no longer producing. Physical changes in the wattles, comb and pubic bones indicate when a hen is past production. These hens become stew hens for the farmers' personal use, and for the occasional sale.

Turkeys

Plamondon and Black raise turkeys for sale at Thanksgiving. They choose a smaller breed, such as Heritage, Standard Bronze or Bourbon Reds. Each bird is purchased for about \$7.00 and eats about \$8.00 in feed until butchering age. These birds sell better than the typical Broad Breasted in small markets because they are a manageable size and have a delicious flavor. Turkeys are pastured and raised in a similar manner to the broilers. It takes about five months to raise a turkey to butchering age. These spry birds have no qualms about flying over the electric fencing, however, and therefore the farmers lose birds to predation. "The coyotes think that turkey is a wonderful meal," stated Black in a resigned tone.

Pork

Norton Creek Farm raises approximately ten pigs per year. They cost about \$50 each, then about \$70-\$80 per animal in feed until slaughtering. The pigs get pig feed, as well as a healthy supply of old milk, leftover eggs, corn and pasture grass.

These animals run on the pastures with the birds. They are easy to care for, according to Plamondon and Black, and a lot of fun. Plamondon writes in a Norton Creek Newsletter that "they're very happy creatures and always seem to be smiling." Customers pre-order pork by the half- or whole-pig and the meat is processed by a butcher in Harrisburg. Plamondon says that since pigs get smarter as they get older, they are sent to slaughter just about the time they get mischievous. Plamondon remarked that "farmers who breed pigs, and keep mature animals... must be really smart to be able to outwit (them)."

Equipment

Most of the equipment on Norton Creek Farm was purchased used. Black estimates that they spent approximately \$5,000 on their processing and storage appliances. For the broiler enterprise, they own a scalding tank, a tub picker, a freezer, an ice machine, tables, and sinks. Karen Black describes the tub picker, shown on page 6, "(The) tub picker... is sort of like a big washing machine tub with rubber fingers stuck in the sides and a platter on the bottom with more fingers.... (T)he platter rotates, and the chicken goes in and it gets tumbled around and the feathers get wiped off on the rubber fingers." For the egg enterprise, they own refrigerators and an egg washer, which they bought from OSU "extremely used." The egg washer, the

Figure 3: Numbers Sold by Venue, 2003

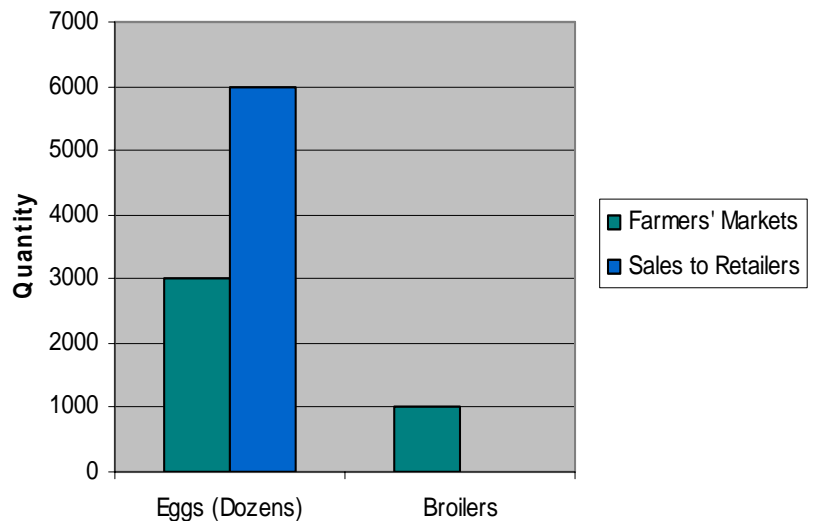


Table 1: Norton Creek Farm Equipment Prices by Enterprise

Item	Price Paid by Norton Creek Farm	Approximate Price New
Poultry Production:		
Brooder Houses	\$150.00 X 19	\$150.00 X 19
Hen Houses	\$150.00 X 6	\$150.00 X 6
Chicken Feeders	\$12.50 X15	\$15.00 X 15
Turkey Feeders	\$5.00 X 8	\$400.00 X 8
Waterers	\$18.00 X 11	\$18.00 X 11
Electric Fencing	\$.20 per foot X 2000 feet	\$.20 per foot X 2000 feet
Tractor	\$4,000.00- '57 Ford 30 HP	\$13,000 New 30 HP
TOTAL	\$8,575.50	\$20,773.00
Egg Processing:		
Refrigerators	\$250.00 X 2	\$800.00 X 2
Aquamagic Egg Washer	\$50.00	\$8,000.00
Collection Containers	\$10.00 X 10	\$10.00 X 10
Egg Cartons	\$.25 each X 2000 new cartons. Rest are recycled.	\$.25 each X 9000 eggs per year
TOTAL	\$1,150.00	\$11,950.00
Broiler Processing:		
Upright Freezer	\$450.00	\$450.00
2 Tables	\$75.00 Each	\$200.00 Each
Sink	\$250.00	\$1,500.00
Ice Machine	\$1200.00	\$2,000.00
Scalder	\$800.00	\$5,000.00
Tub Picker	\$650.00	\$650.00
Butchering Utensils	\$100.00	\$100.00
Packaging	\$70.00	\$70.00
TOTAL	\$3,670.00	\$10,170.00

Aquamagic, is a unique piece of equipment. “(I)t’s cool,” says Black. “It’s like an egg car wash.... It has these belts that have fingers on them, and the eggs sit between the fingers and they go through and there’s brushes and the spray bar for the wash side, and more brushes and fans for the dry side. And then going out it’s got a series of trips for the different weights for the grades..... It does the whole nine yards.” Only the upright freezer and the tub picker were bought new.

Plamondon says that the brooder houses and hen houses cost about \$150 per house to build. He recommends making your own feeders, waterers, and nest boxes out of inexpensive lumber and other materials. Another necessary input is the electric fencing, which Black and Plamondon built with aluminum wire and step-in fence posts. The primary cost, Plamondon says, is in the posts, not the wire. The fencing costs about \$.20 per foot. See Table 1 for equipment costs.

They use a tractor to move hen houses a couple of times a year, and spread manure with a rear scraper blade on the tractor. Plamondon has adopted the philosophy of the Petaluma Farming model, and states in his article highlighted in Figure 1 that by using these methods, “Heavy labor is shunned.”

Profitability by Enterprise

Plamondon advises readers in an online article about keeping free-range hens that “To keep an operation profitable, it’s very important to recognize that you can’t participate in the commodity market. This means producing the best product you possibly can and marketing it to the most discriminating consumers you can find.” See Table 2 for a comparison of Norton Creek prices to the conventional industry.

Eggs provide year round income on Norton Creek Farm. 3,000 dozen eggs were sold from the Farmers’ market and 6,000 dozen were sold through retail stores in 2003 (see Figure 3). Pullets cost about \$1.00 each and cost about \$5.00 to raise to the point of laying. In 2003, eggs sold for \$3.00-\$4.00 per dozen. Birds that were past production sold for \$1.60/lb. as stewing hens. Egg cartons are purchased from Pactiv Corporation, and cost \$.25 each. The farmers reuse cartons, including those from other people. At the farmers’ markets, they have a sign saying “Recycle Your Egg Cartons Here.” They use old cartons for egg sales at the farmers’ markets and reserve the new cartons for retail market sales.

In 2003, approximately 1000 broilers were sold through farmers’ markets (see Figure 3). Broiler chicks cost \$.80 each and cost around \$3.00 to raise to butchering age. Broilers sold for about \$2.40/lb. Income from broilers was about one-third of income from egg sales. Turkeys sold for \$3.00/lb. Income from turkeys was 5.7% of total income. Lamb sold for \$3.00/lb, and pork sold for \$2.40/lb. Lamb and pork yielded 2.3% of the total income (see Figure 4.)

Plamondon estimates that they spent \$1.25 on every carton of eggs in 2003. This included packaging, feed, housing, brooder heat, and ice. For the broilers, packaging and feed were the primary costs, equating \$3.07 per bird (see Figure 5).

Pastured animals are generally healthier than confined animals due to the reduced capacity for the spread of disease. Low overhead costs, and simple living allow Plamondon and Black to make ends meet on a modest income. In 2004, Plamondon was still writing professionally to produce additional income, but the family hopes the farm will be self sustaining in the near future.

Predation is the biggest challenge to Norton Creek Farm’s profitability. In 2003, a particularly bad year, 64% of their turkeys were lost to coyotes. Bobcats, dogs, raccoons, hawks, great horned owls, and rats also threaten the livestock. Electric fencing works very well for dogs and coyotes, which are shocked once and subsequently avoid the fence, but raccoons are not deterred. Plamondon says that he makes regular calls to USDA-Aphis agents for help with trapping.



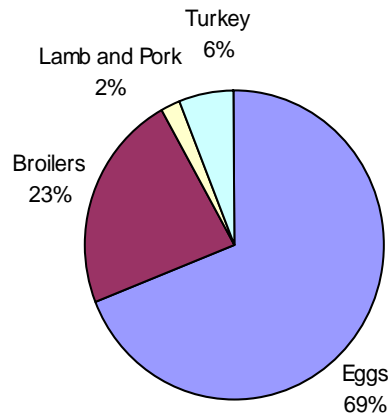
Karen Black with the tub picker.

Table 2: Comparison of Prices Received, 2003

Norton Creek Farm Product Prices, 2003		National Price Average for Conventional Farm Products, 2003	
Pastured Broilers	\$2.40 per pound	Broilers	\$.34 per pound
Pastured Turkeys	\$3.00 per pound	Turkeys	\$.36 per pound
Pastured Eggs	\$3.50 per dozen	Eggs	\$.73 per dozen
Pastured Pork	\$2.40 per pound	Pork	\$.28 per pound
Pastured Lamb	\$3.00 per pound	Lamb	\$.94 per pound

Source: <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/reports/nassr/price/zap-bb/agpran04.pdf>

Figure 4: Income by Enterprise, 2003



He says that they are professional and skilled at trapping only the animals engaged in destructive behavior. “But,” he adds as a warning, “Mother Nature is out there waiting for you.”

Goals for the Future

When asked about personal goals, Karen Black said simply, “I would like to be able to pay the mortgage and buy the odd car as needed, and...support the household on the farm income.” Plamondon was a little more specific, saying that he would like to have about \$.35 from each dollar of income go to costs. Currently, the rate is about \$.50. Increasing profitability might mean raising more hens, since there is so much space on their property. There are also other markets into which the farm could expand, including the farmers’ market in Albany, and local restaurants.

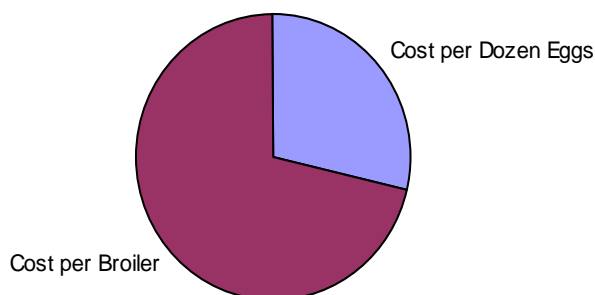
Philosophy and Advice to New Farmers

Black’s advice to new farmers is “Make Haste Slowly.” She observes that people often bite off more than they can chew. She advises starting small and taking on things experimentally, like a 4-H project. Black and Plamondon have done their research, and advise others to do the same. Black suggests that it’s good to become an expert in your field, saying, “(Y)ou want to find a way that you can be the best at something....You want to be the best at what you’re doing (and) be able to explain why you’re the best at what you’re doing.” One way that Black does this is to stay abreast of trends and policy-making in the industry by attending conferences, such as those hosted by USDA Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (<http://wsare.usu.edu/>) and the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (<http://>



Karen Black moves a portable brooder house.

Figure 5: Production Costs by Enterprise- Chickens, 2003



www.pasafarming.org/). She also serves on the board of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association (<http://appa.org/>).

Black and Plamondon made the choice to farm as a statement of their values and philosophy. They are passionate about their efforts in growing high-quality food by sustainable methods. Plamondon writes about this in their Norton Creek News, saying:

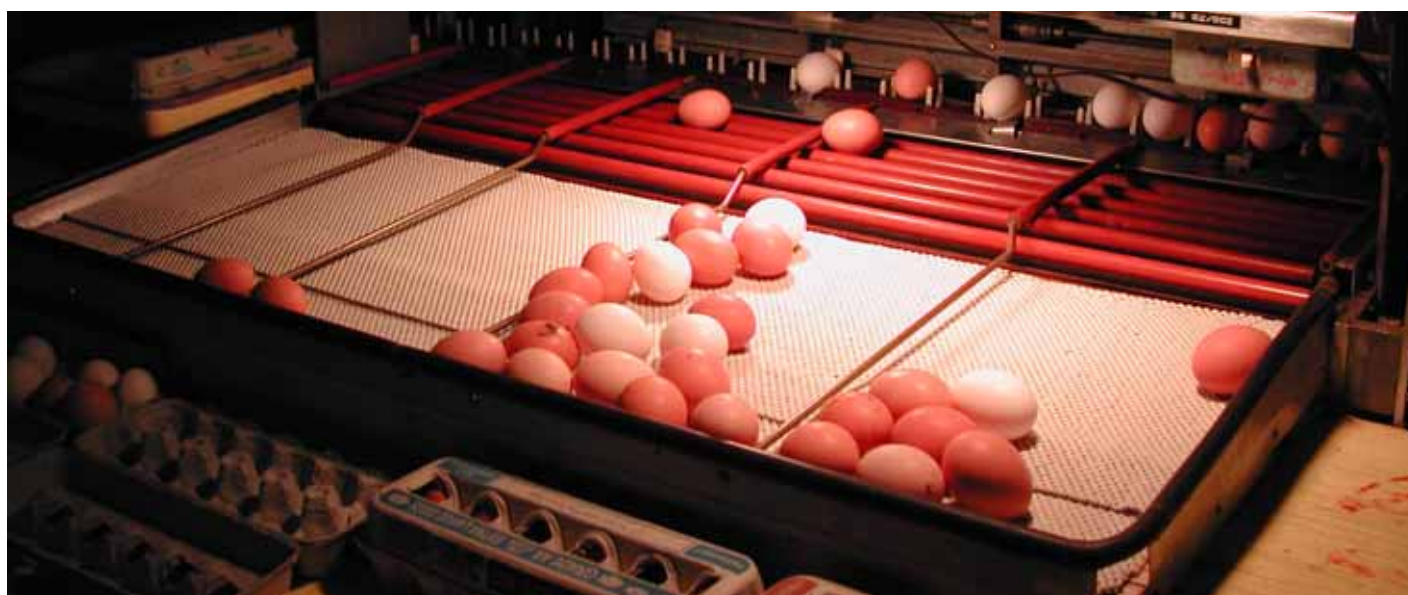
“While the general trend in agriculture is toward the use of 100% confinement for livestock... we’ve found that pasturing adds quality while making farming simpler and environmentally friendly.

On pasture, there’s an entire ecosystem geared toward absorbing manure, eliminating pollution and shoveling. All our livestock can get real value from a diet that includes pasture plants.

Perhaps most importantly, the addition of fresh green plants to the diet adds quite a bit of flavor to the meat and eggs, while the lack of crowding makes health problems uncommon.

Besides, it’s more fun this way.”

When asked about the intangible benefits of farming, Black says that she likes living in the country. She likes seeing things come to fruition before her eyes. She likes learning, being passionate about something, and conveying that passion to other people. And she likes the benefits to her children-- the time spent with them, and the ability to provide them with an opportunity to do things that are “obviously important.” On Norton Creek Farm, these values are paramount.



The Aquamagic Egg Washer at work.

Northwest Direct is a four-year research project involving the five partners listed below. Our goal is to increase profitability of small farms in the Pacific Northwest through research and extension. We have documented locally based food systems, developed case studies of direct marketing farmers, fostered expansion of farmers markets, and addressed regulatory and infrastructure barriers to direct sales. Northwest Direct is coordinated by Washington State University's Small Farms Program. More information is available at www.nwdirect.wsu.edu.



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