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Sonoma County sheep rancher develops wool niche



Courtesy of Joe Pozzi Joe Pozzi, pictured with his dog Sam, is a cattle and sheep rancher on the coastal region of Northern California. He uses the coarse wool from his sheep breeds for bedding and other products for the home.

Rancher Joe Pozzi raises sheep and markets the wool through added value products.

VALLEY FORD, Calif. — Joe Pozzi knows sheep. Over the past 20 years he's been processing, producing and selling his locally sourced wool to produce natural products for the home.

"I grew up in ranching and in the late '80s I started to develop products to bring added value," he said. "At that time the farm gate value was very low so being a small producer I realized that if I was to continue in business I needed to go directly to the consumer."

He began talking with his lamb customers that also had a strong interest in the wool.

Pozzi Ranch is in the coastal region of Northern California, where the average rainfall is over 40 inches per year. The sheep he raises are traditional coarse-grade wool British breeds, including Dorset, North Country Cheviot, Romney, Suffolk, Hampshire and Border Lester. They thrive in the climate.

"Their coarse wool easily sheds the heavy rains of this region and keeps the sheep warm in the winter," he said. "Wool from my sheep is not used for high-end clothing but for bedding or blankets. So, I started to develop markets."

His wool is used by manufacturers of natural bedding products such as pillows, comforters, blankets and mattresses.

At Sonoma Wool Co., Pozzi wool, which is from Pozzi Ranch and other ranches in Northern California and Oregon, goes into a variety of products, such as dryer balls, dish drying mats and even dog toys.



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Pozzi's partner, Amy Chestnut, looked into ways to develop additional products. The dryer balls have been a success as a replacement for dryer sheets. They remove static electricity from clothes and reduce drying time. The products are sold online and in retail stores in Northern California.

"Wool is such an incredible fiber. ... We wanted to re-introduce people to the wonders of wool, and make it available to them in everyday, practical products," he said.

"We love working on the land, educating those who are not involved in ranching and providing food and fiber for the public."

Pozzi said the biggest challenge facing the sheep industry is the reduction in infrastructure. The number of slaughter houses is shrinking and the mill that washes the sheared wool is in Texas.

However, there are several carding mills — a process that untangles, cleans and inter-mixes the wool fibers — in California.

"Our standards define how the animals are cared for, how the natural resources on the land are protected, and how the wool is harvested from the sheep," Pozzi said. "Keeping our operation local reduces our collective carbon footprint and helps our local economy to thrive."

Tim Tesconi, executive director of Sonoma County Farm Bureau, recognized Pozzi's contributions to agriculture.

"A man of the land, Joe Pozzi epitomizes the new breed of American rancher, a college-educated entrepreneur who balances economic viability with environmental stewardship," he said. "Joe is a trail blazer in livestock marketing. His progressive attitude and innovative spirit in livestock production and marketing are helping to preserve a way of life on the coastal rangelands of Sonoma and Marin counties."

Joe Pozzi

Occupation: Sheep and cattle rancher

Home Residence: Valley Ford, Calif.

Family: Daughter, Alexandra

Personal Quote: "Those who make their living on the land show, time after time, that with proper land management practices, we protect and enhance the natural resources while producing food and fiber. We need to continue to develop relationships with those who are unfamiliar with our practices and demonstrate the importance of what we provide to the community, country and world."

<http://www.capitalpress.com/Profit/20140920/sonoma-county-sheep-rancher-develops-wool-niche>