

## South Dakota Farmer Builds Countertops In Farm Shop

Jeff Hoeft has taken farming diversity to a new level. He's converted most of his farm shop into a manufacturing plant to make customized countertops out of stone slabs. After a couple years of research and convincing his banker and wife that it was a good idea, Hoeft started Prairie Stone in August 2020 on his New Effington, S. Dak., farm. It's a very rural area at least 70 miles from any large city.

The idea for it came from a couple of events. After a 2015 back fusion surgery, Hoeft, who has farmed for 25 years, was advised he shouldn't plan on farming his whole life. Then, in 2018 he was frustrated with the cost and two-month delay of getting countertops when he was rebuilding his home after a fire. With some guidance from people in the stonecutting industry, including the Stone Fabricators Alliance, he started thinking seriously about creating Prairie Stone.

He sold some land to help fund the building remodel and equipment. Cutting back from 2,800 acres to 1,200 acres gives

him the time to run both operations. He sees being rural as an advantage.

"The burnout rate for stone shops is pretty high. Because we also farm, it's actually a nice change of pace. We can be as busy as we want to be," Hoeft says.

Because the shop is on his own property, he saves on rent and water bills and doesn't have to meet city regulations. That makes his pricing competitive. Customers in a 100-mile radius don't mind traveling to a rural location, and a design feature on the business website allows customers to choose the type and color of stone they want from the comfort of their homes.

"We can take a digital picture of the stone so customers can see exactly what it will look like," Hoeft says.

He has about 70 large slabs of granite and quartz (man-made material with resin to add color) from stone supplier MSI in stock and can order whatever customers want.

He cuts the stone precisely with an Italian-made computerized CNC saw with a 30 hp motor. Other computerized tools polish and



Jeff Hoeft converted his farm shop to build customized countertops out of stone slabs, using an Italian-made computerized CNC saw to cut the stone.

edge the stone. All require lots of water, 50 gal./minute, that collects in drains and is 100 percent recycled. About 10,000 gal. of water/day is filtered and conditioned to reuse.

Hoeft and a couple of employees install the countertops for local customers, but they also bid on commercial jobs. They recently finished windowsills and shipped them to a Florida hotel, for example, and are open to customers anywhere in the U.S.

Hoeft says others in the industry have warned him that demand will grow and he will run out of space. Not a problem, he says.

On the farm there's plenty of acreage for expansion. For him it's just like planting more acres.

"If you think you want to do something new, just do the research," he encourages. "This is a way to stay involved with farming and have a good life."

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## Midwest Hazelnut Growers Trying To Crack The Market



Several Midwest hazelnut growers banded together to form the American Hazelnut Co., in order to establish processing and distribution for their crop.

Two dozen Midwestern hazelnut growers have built a market for their nuts by creating demand before they have a supply. Frustrated when selling their nuts at farmers markets without much return, they banded together.

"The problem with getting a new crop established is we didn't produce enough to establish processing and distribution," says Brad Niemceck, a founding member of the American Hazelnut Company (AHC). "In Wisconsin, even cracking the nuts required a licensed facility."

Once they formed the company, the

growers worked with the Kickapoo Culinary Center. The center is a food company incubator that rents licensed processing space to start-ups or small producers. They also developed a relationship with large scale, low cost hazelnut producers in Oregon.

"We have lowered our costs for reducing our nuts to clean kernels by 25 to 30 percent in the past few years, but that still leaves the cost at around \$11 per pound," says Niemceck. "In Oregon their costs are around a dollar a pound."

Blending nuts in a ratio of 10 to one, Oregon to Midwest, AHC gained a marketable supply and the lower costs needed to attract customers.

"Our first product was oil followed by non-gluten flour," says Niemceck. "As a result of the COVID-inspired home baking increase, the flour may soon outsell the oil, which is doing reasonably well also."

The difficulty AHC faces with oil is to break into the market and earn shelf space. He explains that grocers want a fast turnover and are skeptical that a few bottles of a new oil will compete against 6 to 10 ft. of shelves filled with established oils.

Another problem for the growers is that the hazelnuts grown in the Midwest often

produce less than a pound of nuts per bush. In addition, there is no such thing as a hazelnut bush harvester. The AHC is working with the University of Wisconsin Extension to trial harvesters.

An even bigger problem is increasing the number of hazelnut producers.

"Most of the early innovators in hazelnut production in the Midwest are hobbyists, and our median age is older," says Niemceck, who recently turned 80. "There are barriers to entry in terms of costs and time to establish bushes that deter young people. We are trying to find ways to encourage new producers."

Niemceck believes the niche product has a future. Several young people from large farming operations have joined AHC. One is adding hazelnuts as an enterprise, while the other is waiting for higher producing clones under development to be introduced.

"It will take about 6 years for the bushes planted this year to produce a significant number of nuts," says Niemceck. "However, they should continue producing for more than 50 years."

Niemceck is optimistic about the introduction of a third product to the AHC brand. "We are introducing roasted hazelnut kernels this year," he says. "They will be



The growers have developed a relationship with large scale, low cost hazelnut producers in Oregon.

exclusively from our bushes, not a blend."

AHC products are available at 45 food co-ops and other stores in Minnesota and Wisconsin and two in Illinois. They are also available from the AHC website. Hazelnut flour is priced at \$15.95 per pound. Oil is \$15.95 per 8-oz. bottle, and kernels are \$18.75 per pound.

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## Business Is Booming At Exotic Livestock Auction

After being in the livestock auction business for more than 50 years, the Clay Center Livestock Sale Barn in Kansas decided to mix it up and add "alternative animal" sales 3 years ago.

"We've had everything from camels to lemurs to baby African porcupines," notes co-owner Mitch Langvardt.

The most common "exotics" are unusual domestic breeds such as Highlander cattle, rare poultry, chinchilla rabbits, and buffalo.

"A lot of people who have livestock want a fun animal they can keep on the farm that co-exists with other animals," Langvardt says. So the sale attracts a different crowd than the sale barn's regular auctions, and the extra sales diversify the business and add income.

He notes that it has been a learning process, and he contacts state and federal veterinarians to find out regulations for different animals. Most can cross state lines, but the lemur, for example, had to be born in Kansas in order to be sold at the

Kansas auction.

Alternative or exotic animal sales are held in several locations across the country, and buyers travel from all over when they are interested in selling or buying animals.

"A female camel brought in \$8,000, the highest sale price we've had," Langvardt says, adding that a less exotic bottle-baby mini donkey sold for \$4,000.

The Coronavirus pushed back the 2020 April auction to June and bidders were able to bid through online auction access. That benefits sellers because more people see their animals.

On Saturday, equipment and caged animals are sold. Sunday sales include miscellaneous items, hoof stock and exotics.

"There is an admission fee because otherwise we would get inundated with people. That's another reason we do an online version because of space," Langvardt says.

The sales barn got a lot of attention with its first auction that included camels, water buffalos and zebras. Each auction is different;



Clay Center Livestock Sale Barn in Kansas holds 2 exotic animal auctions a year. "We've sold everything from camels to lemurs to baby African porcupines," says Mitch Langvardt.

the first baby monkey was on the latest auction in October, for example.

The variety keeps it interesting, but also challenging.

Clay Center holds two alternative animal auctions a year, and the next auction will be held sometime in April 2021. Check

Facebook for more information.

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