

Old MacDonald Wouldn't Recognize This Farm

Bitten by Livestock Market, Owners Test Other Moneymaking Ideas

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Jim Moore has slowly sold off the animals that once made up his St. Mary's County farm. First went nearly all of his 30 hogs. Then, late last year, he got rid of 17 of his 30 cows. In their place are more than two dozen long-haired alpacas, reminders that difficult times have forced him and other livestock producers to adapt.

The alpacas eat less than traditional farm animals, and their cashmere-like wool can be harvested without hauling them to a slaughterhouse. Moore escorts them to dog-show-like conventions, where the quality of their wool is judged.

"Here I am, a big, burly farm boy, in the show ring with an alpaca," Moore said. "I get razzed pretty good by my friends."

The economy and other factors have forced many livestock producers to virtually halt or dramatically refashion their operations. Nearly all of the few dozen producers in Southern Maryland have cut the number of animals they raise by at least half or gotten rid of their animals altogether, agricultural officials said.

Last year, feed prices shot up, mostly because of new demand for corn and soybeans to produce ethanol. Record-high gas prices during the summer made a trip to a slaughterhouse more expensive. Drought drove up the price of hay and made it scarce until late summer.

And after livestock producers invested more than usual in raising their animals, they were met with lower-than-usual

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Moore feeds some of the remaining 13 cows on his farm, called Moore or Less Farm, in Bushwood in St. Mary's County. He used to have 30 cows, as well as 30 hogs, but rising feed costs and poor sale conditions prompted him to scale back.

