

Alpaca farming a recession-proof business

• Parkman woman has success selling fiber from animals she raises

Editor's note — This is part of a series of stories on the state of the agriculture industry in the Sheridan area.

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When Mariann Foster and her husband, Jeff, of Parkman bought their first alpaca in 2005, they planned to raise the animal to breed and sell its offspring.

"I quickly found I had a weakness," said Foster, adding that she loved the animals so much she quickly discovered that she couldn't imagine selling one.

"So we've never actually listed an animal for sale," she said. "Which a lot of the other farms, my friends, thought we were crazy. I mean you can make a good income selling the

females."

When the Fosters bought their first alpaca, a good female could sell for upward of \$20,000.

Then the market for selling alpacas crashed, and Foster's weakness became her strength. Instead of focusing on breeding and selling alpacas, she created a different product — their fiber.

"We've had our best January, February, March and April this year," Foster said. "The economy hasn't affected us. It ended up working well."

The business, Big Horn Mountain Alpacas, is run by Foster, who tends to the animals' daily needs and creates hats, scarves, and other products from their fibers.

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Mariann Foster gets help from her 4-year-old daughter, Maria, as she spins yarn from the wool of alpacas at Big Horn Mountain Alpacas on May 8 near Parkman.

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The business came out of Foster's desire to stay home with her daughter, Maria, who was born in June 2005. Before then, Foster was a teacher. She raises the animals on the 7.5 acres owned by her and her husband.

"Very quickly (after Maria was born) I knew I needed a job," Foster said. "So I just kind of looked at different options. So I thought of a fitness center because I like to run and all that. But I've really always had an interest in animals and agriculture.

"So we bought a pregnant female alpaca, then we bought a few more, and they have been increasing ever since."

While raising alpacas allows Foster to be home with her daughter, the business does have its challenges.

For example, Foster has had to mother baby alpacas and feed them throughout the night. She started her business from scratch, teaching herself to create yarn, weave and make finished products for purchase.

"I'm self-taught," Foster said. "The Internet is great. I didn't know what a spinning wheel was — well, I had an idea."

Foster said that during the process of teaching herself how to spin, she discovered that spinning had grown in popularity since Sept. 11, 2001. According to Foster, the

terrorist attacks created a desire within people to know where what they buy comes from.

"When I sell things I make, I put a little picture with the animal on it, and so many people have commented that they really like to know where it came from, who made it, that the animal is well taken care of," Foster said. "So now I do that all the time.

"A picture goes with everything. That really helps because people want to know where their fibers are coming from and they want to buy USA now a lot more."

Other challenges of raising alpacas include the long hours required to care for the animals, growing the business, and being creative with animal fibers to make items people will buy.

"I've worked harder than I have in my whole life doing this, it's not just like a 9-to-5 job," Foster said. "It's from sunup to sundown, but you get breaks. I could break when I want."

Foster admitted she experienced a lot of trial and error when she first started.

She has added Angora rabbits to her animal family and has begun spinning or creating finished items from other fibers, such as dog or cat hair, that customers send her.

Despite the challenges of keeping up with orders, managing the business, and long hours with the

animals, Foster said she likes to work alone and is unlikely to hire any help. She has considered it, though.

"I got to a point with the hats that I just could not keep up," she said. "If people sent me their fibers, I'd make them a cowboy hat for \$50. I was getting farms sending me enough for 30. Everything was going good but I was so overworked."

Foster said she thought she would either have to hire somebody and "get all the things you need to get" — insurance, a better work area, etc. — or raise her prices.

"So I decided to raise the prices," she said. "And I get a little less orders, but I can handle it, and I'm actually making more."

Foster has taken advantage of help available through the Wyoming Business Council.

A couple of years ago, she said, she received a \$5,000 grant to study the alpaca market and was able to purchase an electric carding machine with some of that funding. The machine has wire teeth that comb and clean fibers before they are spun into yarn.

She has also used the Wyoming First program through the WBC. The program highlights items made in Wyoming and helps promote them through catalogs and identification by stickers with the bucking horse logo.