

2017 Conservation Farmers of the Year

Jamison Farm



Sukey and John Jamison

When Sukey Jamison bought sheep for her children's 4-H project in the late 1970s, little did she know that that decision would ultimately lead to her family becoming one of the country's most-sought-after purveyors of lamb – and one of Westmoreland County's most outstanding conservationists.

"I was a complete novice," Sukey said of her lack of knowledge of raising sheep at the time of the decision some 40 years ago; and, in fact, neither she



nor her husband John had any farming experience at all before they bought a stone house that "came with 65 acres" near Pleasant Unity just a few years prior.

But the Jamisons obviously were good studies, because today their current farm, a 212-acre property in Unity Township, processes some 3,000 lambs

each year, and of a such quality that they are sought by some of the finest chefs and restaurants in America.

The Jamisons attribute much of the quality of their product to the quality of the grass that grows here in southwestern Pennsylvania. "We had to lime when we first moved here, but not very often since," John said, noting that the clover in the pastures fixes nitrogen, which in turn prompts the grass to grow. Local rainfall – averaging 40 to 45 inches a year – promotes grass growth too and allows three to five hay cuttings a year.

With grass their only crop for some four decades, and with an extensive grid of fencing that allows them



to keep the sheep in any of 20 paddocks and away from the stream, the Jamison farm may produce the least sedimentation of any work-

ing farm of its size in the county. There is so little erosion and such good grass on their property that the Jamisons were recently able to use an animal runway as a paddock.

John uses a computer program to keep track of where and when he moves the flock in an intensive

rotational grazing system that dates back to 1978,

created with the help of several local conservation agencies. Today, the expanded system uses more than 28,000 feet of high-tensile fence,

and more than 8,000 feet of waterline that carries drinking water for the animals from a holding tank in the barn to most of the paddocks, traveling some 5,000 feet to the farthest point. Three paddocks are fed by spring developments and one well is dedicated to the troughs.

The Jamisons have a Natural Resources Conservation Service Grazing Plan, a Conservation Plan, and are updating the Manure Management Plan for their farm, which is preserved through the Westmoreland County Agricultural Land Preservation Program.

