

Australian Exchange Youth Tours Local Family Beef Operations

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STOUCHSBURG (Berks Co.) — A 27-year-old Australian man whose family runs a 476-acre sheep, beef and potato farm toured several beef farm operations and a livestock auction last week in southeastern Pennsylvania to learn more about how his American peers operate.

Geoff Bowles, from Mont Compass, Australia, is a member of the Victor Harbor Rural Youth Club, through which he was able to participate in an exchange program established between the United States' 4-H program and the Rural Youth organization of abroad.

That program is called the International Farm Youth Exchange (IFYE).

Bowles had been staying with a Pennsylvania family through the youth exchange program which works in cooperation with 4-H, although the ages of 4-H youth who travel range from 18 to 24, while the Rural Youth Club travelers are usually in the mid to late 20 and early 30s.

Though the local beef tour hadn't been planned prior to last week, through the Penn State Extension Service, was able to contact the Berks County/South East Cattlemen's Association and enjoy a quickly arranged, but full and representative tour of area beef operations and a livestock auction.

Gerri Gammel, president of the S.E./Berks County Cattlemen, said, "We're very happy to accom-

modate Geoffrey Bowles, and I think it was a good exchange of ideas and thoughts on both sides. And we tried to show him the range of our cattle industry — cow-calf operation, feeder operation, auction and a slaughter house-meat market."

The tour gathered at the home farm of Mike Firestine, who raises forage and grain crops, pumpkins, and Polled Hereford beef cattle in addition to serving as vice president in charge of agricultural lending for the Lebanon Valley National Bank.

From the Firestine home, Bowles was taken first to view Firestine's several acre cow-calf operation in the Millcreek Township area, where the Firestine and Bowles discussed the use of permanent paddocks and watering systems, forages, shipping weights, and general operational practices.

From there, Bowles was taken to Clair Zimmerman's Stouchsburg area farm where he fattens about 100 steers on silage and high moisture corn. At Zimmerman's Bowles remarked about the 1,200-pound to 1,300-pound, top-conditioned Limousin-Charolais steers. Bowles said he usually markets grass-only fed cattle at about 700 pounds.

Next, the entourage, including Shirley Fake, his exchange host, visited the Leesport Farmer's Market, where Bill Weist, co-owner of the livestock auction facility, gave him a tour of the sales ring and an explanation of the sale's scale system.

From there Bowles went to Peters Brothers meat shop in Leinhardt, where Rex Peters gave a tour of the facility and talked about the type of meat and animals they seek.

Bowles said that farming is very different in Australia. He said that the climate is drier and ranges in temperature from freezing to 110, which necessitates irrigation for all crops and a water pond in each of the family farm's 20 paddocks planted in clover, rye and fescue.

He said they raise 1,000 sheep, about 28 acres of potatoes per year and keep about 150 cows for a cow-calf operation. Bowles said that he raises a Peidmontese cross, that originally came out of Italy, went to Canada and has been distributed since.

According to Bowles, while about 60 percent of the Australian beef is exported, the vealers sell best. He said vealers are sold at nine months age, which is much longer than normal for domestic veal.

The way their cattle are sold is much different also. According to Bowles, an agent for a major meat buyers or a local butcher comes to

the farm to make requests for cattle. He said an agent will come to the farm two or three times a year to set up purchases, depending on how much and when the buyer needs the cattle.

He also said that every five years, the potatoes fields are rotated out and put into oats.

Bowles said his family's farm is "in the heart of a dairying area." He said that up until 1971, his parents Russell and Cynthia milked cows, but went into potatoes and then began diversifying.

For many reasons, the world sheep and wool market is extremely low and Australia lost a lot of exports because of the Gulf War and the World Recession, Bowles said. The country has stockpiled 4 million bales of wool, he said.

Thus the importance of the farm's potato and beef crops have taken a higher importance, but offer a chance at survival, he said.

Bowles said he was very grateful for all the help and kindnesses he received during the tour and as part of being involved with the youth programs.

He said that had it not been for his trip sponsor, an Australian land and stock agent, Dalgety Bennet Farmers', he said wouldn't have had been able to make the trip.

The visit, though a surprise, was a pleasant one, according to Firestine and Bowles.

Firestine has been involved with educational tours of many sorts, and hosts groups of children to pick pumpkins out of his fields. He said he enjoyed discussing beef raising with Bowles.

Gammel said she enjoyed the tour also.

"That was actually the first time I showed somebody my farm," she said, adding that she hasn't been involved in beef farming long, only since 1988.

"The other thing, it was interesting for me," she said. "And for the amount of time we had to set it up, everyone was very gracious in allowing him to come in to visit their operations."

For more information on the Berks County/S.E. Cattlemen's Association, call Gammel at (215) 589-4856.



From the left, Mike Firestine holds his daughter Morgan's hand while he talks about his role and practices in a small cow-calf, intensive grazing operation with registered Polled Herefords and Simmentals to Geoff Bowles, a young man from Australia visiting the United States as part of an exchange program.

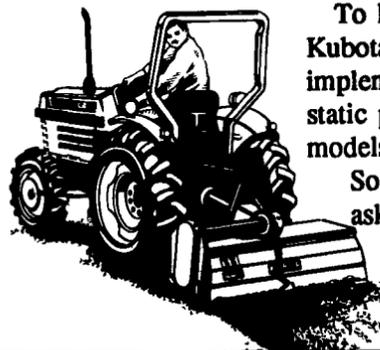
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