

Horses hit their stride

Jefferson equine industry takes off

By KAREN CONTRERAS
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ALDRIDGE – All his life, Randy Funkhouser has hoped to hear the pitter-patter of little feet, or at least hooves.

With more than two dozen thoroughbred foals currently trying out their spindly legs on his horse farm off Earle Road, Funkhouser is having a hay day.

Rattling off his list of three stallions, 40 mares and 14 yearlings, in addition to the babies, Funkhouser is excited about his herd and the reputation O'Sullivan Farms is earning as a quality breeder.

The dark four-board fences form a patchwork pattern over O'Sullivan Farms and enclose a bustling business bringing in purses from the race track, breeding fees and proceeds from horse sales.

"This industry is great, and it provides a lot of opportunities for alternative uses for farmland," Funkhouser said.

Funkhouser took over operating the family farm in 1975 after graduating with a degree in English and creative writing from Stanford University, he said.



Randy Funkhouser of O'Sullivan Farms stands beside a horse. Established by his parents in 1939, O'Sullivan farms is the oldest horse farm in the state, he said.

Horses have always been in his blood, Funkhouser said.

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Being a horse farmer is challenging, but with know-how and luck it can be a great living, said Funkhouser, 52. With the race track in Charles Town attracting a lot of horse business, Funkhouser's farm is becoming the business he has always dreamed of.

"I think horses are the future of Jefferson County agriculture," he said.

The good money on horses

Funkhouser is not alone in his success, according to agricultural experts.

The equine industry is a part of Jefferson County's agriculture that has gone unrecognized, said Roger Boyer, a project manager for the Potomac Headwaters

Resource Conservation and Development Council.

Horses contribute significantly to the county's agricultural economy, Boyer said. The equine industry is the fastest growing segment of Jefferson agriculture, said Craig Yohn who specializes in agriculture as a West Virginia University extension agent.

It's not only the thoroughbreds and race horses. Yohn said. Pleasure horses and other breeds are coming on strong in the county.

Dollars and horse sense

Farming his 178 acres and leasing 23 acres more for his business, Funkhouser deals with thoroughbreds only.

Producing horses to race in Charles Town and other tracks is a primary goal of O'Sullivan Farms. Charles Town's 2000 and 2001 horse of the year, Confucius Say, was sired on Funkhouser's farms, he said.

With Charles Town paying an average of \$140,000 a day in purses, breeding winning horses is really beginning to pay off, Funkhouser said. Also, incentive programs to breed thoroughbreds in the state have been a boon for breeders, Funkhouser said.

Stallion fees and the boarding of horses at O'Sullivan Farms add to Funkhouser's income.

Part of the Jefferson equine industry's success is because of horse lovers who need a place to board their horses and stallions for breeding, Funkhouser said. So rather than simply producing horses, Funkhouser also provides a service.

We are a business in which people pay you to provide a service," Funkhouser said.

Lots of farm business Is riding on the horses

Employing five full-time workers on the farm, five at the track and two horse exercisers, Funkhouser spends a lot of money to make his profits.

"It (horse farming) looks pretty, but it means long hours and hard work," he said.

O'Sullivan Farms has been blessed with good help, Funkhouser said. Also, the farm's neighbors have contributed to the farm's success by providing many of the necessities required for a working horse farm.

A local family harvests the hay on Funkhouser's farm, he said. Additional bails are bought from farmers in Jefferson County, said Funkhouser, who added he buys local hay whenever he can.

Smaller horse farms provide a great market for local farmers, Funkhouser said. A farmer with little land is dependent on other farmers for hay.

Many people moving into the area with small horse farms don't have enough land to provide pasture and hay for their horses, Yohn said. Local farmers have the equipment and the land to sell hay to the new market, he said.

Horses only part of the farm economy

Leaving behind the dairy business 14 years ago, Jefferson County farmer Bill G. Grantham now sells hay for horses.

"I've branched out into the hay business," Grantham said. Diversifying his production has helped Grantham keep the farm that has been in his family for seven generations.

Finding new markets and diversifying products has proven critical for Jefferson County farmers, like Grantham, trying to survive in the county's current agricultural economy, Yohn said.

The next installment of "Cultivating Jefferson" will examine the economic viability of agriculture in Jefferson County's overall economy.