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## **A solar success**

By Jim Warren

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PORTER HOLLOW — A rooster's crow, out behind the barn, launches the day at The Jerrys Farm, nestled amid rolling, green-shaded hills in western Fleming County.

In the field below the barn, the young pigs snort around the grass in their mobile pen, impatient for Jerry Neff to fetch the morning rations.

Up on the hill, Jerry Hicks is riding the clattering old mowing machine, pulled by the big Belgian draft horses, Ted and Alice, slaughtering weeds — and being careful not to hit the solar panels collecting energy from the morning sun.

The first time you visit The Jerrys Farm — that's what Hicks and Neff call their place — it's easy to get a mite confused as to just what century these guys are living in.

Those solar panels certainly say 21st century. But the draft horses and the antique mowing machine could suggest that the two Jerrys are stuck smack in the middle of the 19th.

You can blame Neff and Hicks for the confusion. On their little farm here they're trying hard to combine the best of the old and the best of the new.

They do rely on solar power to pump water from the spring-fed pond into a gravity flow system that distributes the water around the farm. And they recently added a Web site to tout their products to the wider world.

But when it comes to cutting weeds, mowing hay or moving heavy stuff, Hicks and Neff hitch up Ted and Alice.

"My grandfather farmed with horses, and I always said that if I had a place of my own I wanted to work it with horses," Hicks said last week.

"When we moved here, some of our neighbors thought we were Amish once the word got out that we were going to farm with horses. Some of the others probably thought we were crazy."

Nowadays, the Jerrys Farm produces grass-finished beef and pork, grass-raised broiler chickens and free-range eggs, as well as honey, for a small but loyal bunch of customers in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and West Virginia.

Some who might have looked askance at Neff and Hicks and their oddball ideas and their antique farm implements are beginning to think there might be something to their madness.

Even their ideas about farming with horses in an era of mighty tractors — and mighty gas prices.

"Some people have started to come around and ask what we'd charge to cultivate their tobacco with the horses," Hicks said. "With the price of gas, I really think there's a growing interest in horses as a supplement to tractors."

Just a few years ago, Neff and Hicks were city slickers with day jobs in Lexington. Hicks was a woodworker and cabinet maker; Neff worked in sales for an engineering firm.

Hicks is a native of Carter County; Neff grew up in West Virginia. But after meeting through mutual friends, they found that they shared a yearning to be in the country, on the land.

Eventually, they decided to go partners in a farm of their own. After scouting areas of Kentucky and West Virginia, they found land they loved on Three Mile Creek here and The Jerrys Farm was born.

From the beginning, Hicks and Neff operated it in a radically different way.

They not only refused to buy a tractor, but they also put no chemical fertilizers on their land. And instead of trying for big volume and big profits, they aimed at small-scale, sustainable agriculture.

Some of their ideas came from books by Joel Salatin and the late John Seymour, two gurus of self-sufficient agriculture. Other concepts they dreamed up themselves.

"We sort of look at the farm as a small country, and that we have to balance the exports and imports so that, hopefully, we come out on the positive side," Neff explained.

"We take organic sustenance away from the land when we produce cattle and hay. But we try to put back just as much organic value as we take away and ideally put back even more."



Charles Bertram

Jerry Hicks drove a team of horses past a solar panel used to power the water pumps at the Jerrys Farm on Three Mile Run Road in Flemingsburg on Wednesday. Photo by Charles Bertram | Staff



**Audio slide show:** [The Jerrys Farm](#)

## IF YOU GO

### Farm open house

The Jerrys Farm holds an open house on the second Saturday of each month. Anyone who wants can tour the farm, pet the horses, feed the chickens and get a taste of country life.

**Where:** 2859 Three Mile Run, Flemingsburg

**Online:** <http://thejerrysfarm.com/>.

All the various activities on the farm are designed to mesh and work together.

All of the rich “natural manure” produced by the livestock goes back on the land, either directly or as compost.

Hicks and Neff raise their pigs and broiler chickens in large mobile pens without bottoms, so the animals actually are on grass at all times. The pens are placed in fields and moved twice a day, so the animals always have fresh grass to explore.

Hicks and Neff say the system makes for healthier animals, while all that rooting and pecking kills insects, clears weeds and improves the soil.

“The pigs do a really good job of converting brushy areas,” Neff said. “They kind of disc and cultivate the soil for us, and we sow grass seed behind them as they go.”

There's a goat named Whitie, who loves to eat weeds, and whose milk supplements the pigs' food. Natural dewormer, Hicks and Neff say.

The cattle eat only grass — “They're leaner and healthier because they're eating what their bodies were designed for,” Neff says — while replenishing the soil with their manure.

All that organic matter is paying off in increased fertility and productivity. This year for the first time, the pair have produced all the hay they'll need for the coming winter.

“That's a really big deal for us,” Hicks said.

The Jerrys let weeds and bushes grow along their fence rows, creating habitat for rabbits and other small mammals, which then become food for hawks. In return, the well-fed hawks refrain from eating the chickens, Hicks and Neff say.

By installing a solar-powered water system that pipes water to the cows, the Jerrys are able to fence off their largest pond to keep cattle out of the pond, so it stays cleaner. Letting bushes and weeds grow up around the pond provides a kind of biofilter, which helps control algae blooms on the water.

Then, there are the draft horses. Hicks and Neff actually own five, including two Percheron mares named Kate and Liz who are on maternity leave after recently foaling.

The horses do the farm's heavy lifting, fertilize the land and hold down costs. They're slower than a tractor, but they don't burn gasoline.

Hicks and Neff say that all of their various farm enterprises make money, although profits are limited because they're still paying for their land.

Now, the partners are considering new enterprises, including a solar-powered kiln that would let them cut, dry and sell their own timber. They also plan to get heavily into produce and may start turning up soon at Farmers Market in Lexington.

“When we lived in town, we were both stressed out with our jobs, always running around and always busy and never getting anywhere,” Neff said. “Now that we're out here, I wouldn't change anything.”

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