

Saving rare breeds of livestock

By Jennifer M. Kendall

Economic woes fill the nightly news. From the down economy, corporate bailouts, bankruptcy, and the credit crisis, the government has its hands full with saving the threatened economy.

A little-known story that rarely makes the news, but that is just as dire, is the "genetic bankruptcy" facing many rare breeds of livestock.

In a small office in downtown Pittsboro, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is hard at work to "bail out" these breeds from sure extinction.

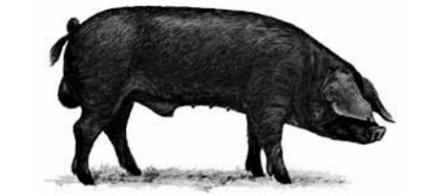
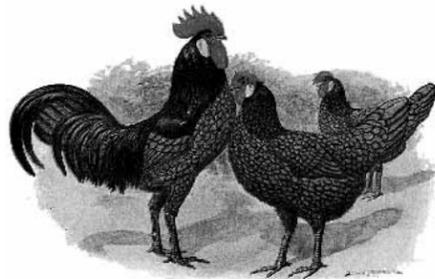
Founded in 1977, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy is a nonprofit membership organization working to protect over 150 breeds of livestock and poultry from extinction. Included are donkeys, cattle, goats, horses, sheep, pigs, rabbits, chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys. ALBC is the pioneer organization in the U.S. working to conserve historic breeds and genetic diversity in livestock.

Breeds of livestock and poultry are threatened because agriculture has changed. Modern food production favors the use of a few highly specialized breeds selected for maximum output in intensively controlled environments.

Many traditional breeds do not excel under these conditions, so have lost popularity and are threatened with extinction. These traditional breeds are an essential part of the American agricultural inheritance. They are remnants of our cultural heritage, but more importantly, they possess genetic material critical for the continued existence and future adaptation of livestock and on-going changes in agriculture. "Our current approach to agriculture is only 60 years old," says Marjorie Bender, Research & Technical Program Director for ALBC. "Already it's changing, because we're learning that food from animals that live on grass is healthier for us, and that the animals are healthier when well cared for outside. The traditional breeds are right at home in the great outdoors. They still know how to find their own food and care for their own young."

Agriculture, like all biological systems, depends on genetic diversity to adapt and respond to an ever-changing environment. Genetic diversity in domestic animals is revealed as distinct breeds, each with different characteristics and uses. Traditionally, historic breeds retain essential attributes for survival and self-sufficiency – fertility, foraging ability, longevity, maternal instincts, ability to mate naturally, and resistance to diseases and parasites. "I've met a couple of Jess Brown's Pineywoods cattle that have had a healthy calf every year, and they're in their 20s," says Jeannette Beranger, Research & Technical Program Manager for ALBC. "They may not be the biggest cattle on the planet, but they are among the healthiest, and from my vantage point, the tastiest!"

As modern agriculture adapts and evolves, we need these genetic resources to draw on for a broad range of future opportunities. Once lost,



The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy [www.albc-usa.org], based in Pittsboro, works to protect more than 150 breeds of livestock and poultry from extinction. Among the conservancy's top priorities are (clockwise from top left) the Andalusian chicken, the Choctaw horse, the Large Black pig, the Florida Cracker cow, the Pomeranian goose and the Gulf Coast sheep.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN LIVESTOCK BREEDS CONSERVANCY

genetic diversity is gone forever. Protection of endangered farm breeds is the only way to prevent bankrupting our future's "genetic trust."

In an effort to preserve the genetic contributions of rare livestock breeds, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy suggests using endangered livestock today, whenever possible, to insure their survival for tomorrow. These breeds can be commercially viable in appropriate, diversified, sustainable agriculture. They are finding a

good fit in small-scale and pasture-based agricultural systems – the very systems for which they were adapted.

Domesticated animals have always been an integral part of agriculture. They provide nutritious foods, such as milk, cheese, eggs and meat, as well as wool, cashmere, mohair and other products that enrich our lives. These animals also provide environmentally friendly services, including nutrient cycling, brush and grass management, pest control, and draft power – all

replacing damaging chemicals and practices.

The need to save traditional, historic livestock and poultry is urgent. Throughout agricultural history, each generation has taken its turn as steward of this genetic trust. Each day, some breeds move closer to extinction. You can help turn this trend around.

■ Become a member of ALBC. Not only will you be supporting the important work of ALBC, but you can become informed about endangered breeds and genetic diversity. You will get the latest information about breed conservation projects and events in your region.

■ Raise endangered breeds. About one third of ALBC members raise endangered breeds. Breeders make up a network participating in hands-on conservation, marketing, and public education.

■ Use rare breed products and services. Get acquainted with local farmers to buy fresh, healthy, rare breed products. LocalHarvest.com will allow you to search for rare breed products.

■ For more info, contact ALBC at P.O. Box 477, Pittsboro, NC 27312, phone 919.542.5704, fax 919.545.0022, email albc@albc-usa.org, or visit www.albc-usa.org

Jennifer M. Kendall is Marketing and Communications Manager for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

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