

Selection and Management of 4-H Market Lambs

By Mike Neary
Extension Sheep Specialist
Purdue University

The 4-H market lamb project makes an ideal 4-H animal project. Some strong advantages for the market lamb project include: low initial cost, it is a short term project (3 to 5 months), the market lamb project is usually very safe for young children and little equipment is needed. In addition, much can be learned about the livestock industry and animal agriculture through the 4-H sheep project.

Objectives

The main objective of the 4-H sheep project should not be to make professional shepherds out of the people participating. Rather, the primary objective for the lamb project is the same as any other 4-H project, developing youth into responsible adults. Leadership skills, responsibility, sportsmanship, time management skills and communication skills can be developed through the 4-H lamb project. Furthermore, the lamb project can help educate kids and parents in the subjects of nutrition, health, meat science, marketing, economics, genetics and numerous other scientific topics.

It is important to be aware of the large numbers of activities the 4-H sheep project encompasses. In addition to showing lambs at the County or State Fair, 4-Hers can participate in record book competitions, public speaking and demonstrations, Make It Yourself With Wool competitions, wool shows, shearing competitions and a breeding sheep project can be developed. The 4-H sheep project, because of this flexibility, has much to offer.

Preparation

Before the actual selection of your market lambs, you need to make some important preparations. Your lambs will need a lot or small pasture to be kept in. Also, some sort of shade and shelter from rain is needed. Feeders (12 inches of trough space per lamb) and water tubs need to be lined up. A small area to store feed and hay will be needed. Furthermore, equipment such as foot trimmers, health supplies, ear tags, etc. should be available before getting your lambs.

Selection of Lambs

Choosing what breed or breeds you want to raise is an important decision. You need to keep in mind that every breed has strong points, as well as weak points. Therefore, match up breeds with your particular situation. commercial white-faced and black-faced can also be used for market lambs. Make sure you know something about the breed character and traits of whatever breed you are choosing. Contact your state or national breed association for information about breeds you are interested in.

When choosing a producer to buy lambs from some important points need to be considered. Primarily, is the breeder an honest, respected person that will truthfully answer questions and assist you should a problem arise? Good producers back their product and help 4-H participants with their questions and offer advice.

When selecting lambs, keep in mind the final objective; production of a lamb with a high quality, lean, muscular carcass that is practically and economically produced. Most lambs should be slaughtered in a weight range of 105 to 130 pounds. Ideally, lambs should be slaughtered when they have from .1 to .2 inches of external body fat. This fat thickness range ensures that carcass quality is adequate, with minimal amounts of excess fat trim. Therefore, the final weight achieved when lambs are finished will vary depending on breed, frame size and nutrition.

A common fault in selecting market lambs is to select lambs that are of an extreme in a particular trait. Single trait selection for any type of livestock can quickly lead to decreased usefulness when other traits are measured. Therefore, lambs should be selected that are "well rounded" or complete. These lambs would be above average in all respects, rather than exceptional in one trait and below average in all others.

What is a complete lamb? A complete lamb is one that is above average in muscling, of adequate frame size to have economical gains and finish at a market acceptable weight and is structurally correct.

When evaluating a young lamb to predict future muscle thickness, you need to keep in mind carcass economics. The highest priced cuts from a lamb come from the hindsaddle, or from the last rib back. Your lamb should show evidence of depth and width through the loin, fullness and length through the rump, with a full, muscular leg and stifle. Also, the forearm area of lambs and fullness behind the shoulders are good indicators of future muscle development. A lamb is born with all the muscle fibers it will ever have, feeding or exercising will not make a lamb into something it is not genetically capable of being.

Frame size in lambs is used to predict growth potential and to predict size (weight) when properly finished. Usually, lambs should be from average to large in frame size, for their breed, for economical gains. Very small and very large frame size lambs should be avoided, as they often finish at weights that are not market acceptable. Frame size is often thought of as just height, when actually it includes body length and body capacity. Frame size can be compared to a rectangular box, with height, length and total volume all making an equal contribution. Ideally, lambs should be long in the hindsaddle (loin and rump) region.

Structural correctness refers to several traits. Certainly, your lambs should have sound mouths, normal eyes, and be free of any abnormalities. Feet and leg placement should be square with normal width and straightness. Furthermore, lambs should have strong pasterns and no feet problems. Do not buy lambs that limp and if a producer has footrot problems in his flock, consider buying from someone else.

Balance or eye appeal is also desirable in your lambs. Eye appeal is a subjective measurement, but generally, lambs should be level in the top line, straight and square over the rump, and not have extreme coarseness through the shoulder, neck and brisket area.

When buying your lambs, make sure they are within a manageable weight range. They need to be at least two months old and heavy enough to attain their finished weight by fair time. Most lambs will gain from 0.5 to 0.75 pounds per day. However, do not make the mistake of buying lambs that are too heavy. Lambs that are held at maintenance too long get stale appearing. Ideally, your lambs should be within a weight range that will allow for normal growth to reach market weight by fair time.

Feeding and Management

Lambs are ruminant animals. Therefore, they require some roughage (at least 15 to 20% of their diet). Also, when changing feeds for lambs do it slowly. It takes from 10 to 14 days for the rumen microbial population to adjust to a new ration. Be especially careful not to feed large quantities of grains to lambs not used to eating them.

Set up a regular feeding schedule and follow it as close as possible. Lambs eat better if fed when it is cool (evening or morning). Observe your lambs closely while they eat to make sure they are healthy.

Keep your feeders and water tanks clean. Make sure you keep the lamb's water fresh.

Market lambs do quite well on a 14% crude protein rations. This can be a mixed ration or a complete feed. For productive gains, lambs should be fed about 3% of their body weight in total feed (hay and grain) per day. Do not drastically increase grain to sheep.

Lambs should be weighed every two weeks and their overall condition evaluated. Two people using a bathroom scale can determine a lamb's weight reasonably close. When weighing, evaluate your lamb's fat cover over the ribs, backbone and at the loin edge. You can adjust the lambs feed up or down, depending on weight and condition.

Have a salt and sheep mineral mix available for your lambs on a free choice basis. This should help to prevent urinary calculi in your lambs.

Lambs will gain faster if they are kept sheared and free of internal parasites. Shear lambs before the weather turns hot. De-worm your lambs at least twice while they are being grown out.

Ask for Help

If you have questions or need information there are many resources to use. Many sheep producers are willing to help 4-Hers. County Extension Offices and state Extension specialists can answer questions and offer advice. There are many sheep magazines and publications that have valuable information contained in them.

