



Sheep Production Essentials: Some Guidelines for Success

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Raising sheep for profit can be a satisfying enterprise. However, there are several management skills that each sheep producer should have to be successful. Each sheep enterprise has different resources: land, labor, capital, feed and management. To raise sheep profitably, you must manage these resources to maximize returns. Below are some other guidelines to make this enterprise successful.

Where Can I Get Information?

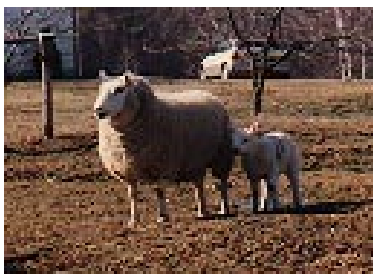
A large amount of information is available on sheep production through books and magazines. With the electronic age, you can also access information over the internet from many universities and in particular, their Cooperative Extension systems. For hard copies of printed information, you can also visit your local Cooperative Extension Office.

Other suggestions for developing a working knowledge of sheep production are to join a local sheep producers organization and visit with other local producers. Most producers are more than happy to share their knowledge. Be sure to visit their operations also for ideas on handling, management, and breeds. Another important person to gain knowledge from is your veterinarian. Discuss health concerns and management suggestions with your vet.

One of the most widely used sources of information is the SID Sheep Production Handbook which is produced by the Sheep Industry Development Program. The handbook is available through many livestock supply catalogs or you can order directly by accessing the website at www.sheepusa.org. Look for the ASI producer order form. You can purchase using a credit card or by printing out the form and mailing with a check to the association office.

What Type of Sheep Should I Raise?

The majority of your income from a sheep operation will come from the lambs produced each year unless you have developed a niche market for your wool. A good rule of thumb is to plan for a 200% lamb crop or in other words, an average of two lambs per ewe. Be conscious of selecting as well as keeping good productive ewes who will produce two lambs per year without assistance and who will maintain their body condition without becoming overly thin or fat. Other considerations to make when choosing sheep are the breed, what type of operation (purebred vs. commercial), and value of wool production. Unfortunately, wool prices have been rather low for the past several years. If you wish to raise sheep for wool production, you will want to search out a specific market for your wool.



Breeds of Sheep

Sheep are generally divided into two different groups: ram breeds vs. ewe breeds. Generally, black face sheep are ram breeds and white face sheep are ewe breeds. Ram breeds are also known as meat breeds while ewe breeds are also known as wool breeds.

As with anything in life, there are some exceptions to this rule. Some breeds are also known as dual purpose breeds because they combine muscling for meat production with high quality wool. For more information on breeds of sheep, visit the Oklahoma State Sheep Breeds Directory at www.ansi.okstate.edu/BREEDS/SHEEP/. Crossbreeding can help you to combine the best attributes of individual breeds into one package. Choose traits that are important to you and then seek a breed or a crossbred that exhibits those traits.

Type of Operation

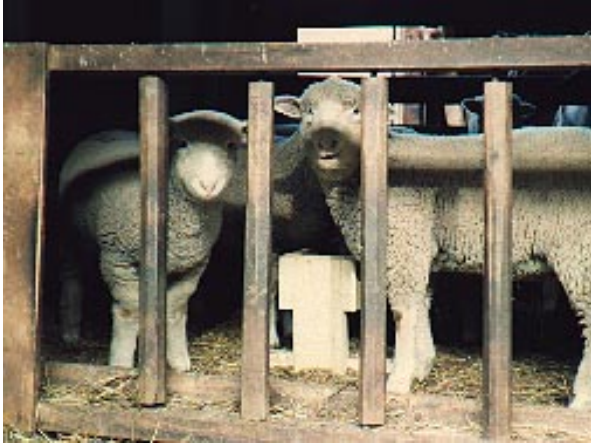
Before you get started in the sheep business, you will need to ask yourself whether you would like to run a purebred or a commercial operation. A purebred operation typically raises sheep of one breed. Often a purebred operation will have all registered sheep that can also be sold through purebred sales. A commercial operation may have unregistered purebred sheep or they may have crossbred sheep. Commercial producers have the benefit of hybrid vigor which is simply the ability of crossbred offspring to increase in productivity over the average of the breeds that were part of the cross. This means that a crossbred lamb could grow faster or produce more wool than either of its parents.

Many purebred sales are held across the country throughout the year. Sales may offer only one or two breeds or they may offer a large variety of breeds for sale. Generally, sheep sales begin with a show that allows the sale management to develop a sale order. The show is also helpful to prospective buyers who wish to select the best animals they can afford. Also, you will want to become familiar with trends in the sheep industry when choosing breeding stock. Choose rams that will compliment the outstanding traits in your ewes and improve their weaknesses.

Ewes for a commercial operation can be bought at a purebred sale and then used in a crossbreeding program or you can contact individual producers to buy larger numbers of lambs that could be purebreds or crossbreds. Another option is to buy animals through an auction barn. Be aware however, that you are more likely to buy problem sheep through an auction barn. Unless a producer sells all his lambs through the auction, he may be selling only cull ewe lambs.

Sheep Operation Management

Management of a sheep operation depends largely on the interests of the producer as well as the resources available such as land, feed, facilities, and others. Intensive management systems may confine sheep year-round while other management systems may have sheep on pasture year-round. Below are some management considerations for sheep operations.



Feed Requirements

Sheep will have varying requirements depending on their age and stage of production. Lambs will need a higher level of nutrition to allow for their growth, while mature dry ewes will need a relatively low level of nutrition.

Lambs can be creep fed before weaning by setting up an area accessible to only the lambs. The creep feed may contain grain, hay or both. Creep rations often start around 18% protein.

The protein level decreases as the lambs mature. For example a creep ration for nursing lambs would start at 18% protein. Near weaning time (generally around 60 days of age) the level can be reduced to 16%. This level can be maintained until you stop feeding grain daily. This will depend on what type of operation you have and how much importance you put on maximum growth.

Mature ewes should not need grain except for the last third of pregnancy and while they are nursing lambs. The protein level for ewes is not as important as the energy. Therefore, you can feed ewes straight shelled corn to keep energy levels high enough for the remainder of pregnancy and to keep body condition on the ewes while they are nursing lambs. During breeding season, you can "flush" the ewes to increase their chances of having twins by feeding a half pound to a pound of grain per day. You can also flush ewes by moving them to a lush pasture.

Rams can be fed similar to ewes. When they are young and growing or while they are in production (breeding ewes) they will need a grain supplement. Rams should be in good body condition at the start of breeding season to insure adequate sperm production for breeding the ewes.

Breeding Season

Breeding seasons will vary depending on when you want your lambs born. Many producers will breed ewes in the fall so that they can wean 40 to 60 lb. lambs for the Easter market. Other producers may breed ewes in the spring so that they can wean 40 to 60 lb. lambs for the Christmas market. Still others may breed to lamb on pasture to take advantage of the spring growing season and large amounts of pasture.

When breeding ewes you will need to consider how many rams can cover the number of ewes you plan to breed. A mature ram out on the range will be able to cover up to 30 ewes, while a mature ram on a farm can cover up to 40 ewes. For ram lambs, decrease the number of ewes to 15 on range and 20 on a farm. In preparing rams for breeding season, they should be in short fleece, their feet should be trimmed, and they should be in good body condition, not overly fat or thin.

Lambing Season

Producers have different methods of lambing out their ewes. In general, you will need to decide if you want to lamb the ewes outside on pasture or inside the barn. The time of year that you lamb will determine to some extent where you lamb. Ewes lambed in the colder part of winter or during periods of cold rains should have those lambs inside to decrease the chance of losing lambs.



During warmer times of the year, ewes can lamb outside on pasture. Also, depending on your management system, you may need to place ewes and newborn lambs in lambing pens for a few days. This allows the lambs to identify their mother as well as the mother to identify lambs. For single born lambs this is not as important as multiple births. Keeping track of two and three lambs can be difficult in large flocks with large numbers of lambs. Placing lambs with their mother in lambing pens also allows you to keep a closer watch on the newborns to make sure they receive colostrum, the antibody rich first milk, and to make sure the ewe has milk and accepts the lambs.

Lambing pens should be at least 4' X 4' to 5' X 5'. For large ewes, you may want larger pens. Plan on having one to two lambing pens for every 10 ewes. Ewes and lambs should be placed in the pens for one to three days after the lambs are born. Allow ewes to lamb in a larger area outside the lambing pens to prevent the ewe from lying on the first lamb as she gives birth to the second lamb.

Weaning Time

Most lambs are weaned at 50 to 60 days of age. Before weaning though, you will want to prepare the ewes for slowing down their milk production. Several days before weaning, stop feeding grain to the ewes. Then, beginning on the day that lambs are weaned, withhold water for 24 hours to help dry off the ewes. Watch ewes carefully for several days for signs of redness on their udder or ewes who are obviously suffering pain from full udders. In some cases, you can relieve some pressure on the udder by milking a small amount out. Do not milk the ewe dry as this will cause her to continue producing milk. In addition, ewes should be fed a low quality dry hay until they have completely dried off. Lambs may continue to eat from a creep feeder for a few days after weaning. After that point, feed the lambs by hand twice a day. Lambs should receive a high quality hay to go with their grain.

Shortly after weaning you may want to sort ram lambs from ewe lambs and feed them accordingly. This will prevent any early maturing ewe lambs from getting bred as well as help to prevent smaller ewe lambs from being pushed away from the feeder by larger ram lambs.



Shearing and Wool Production

Throughout the year as you feed your sheep, minimize the amount of feed that gets into their wool by feeding in feeders and being careful not to throw hay over the top of sheep. When wool is sold it can be discounted for the amount of feed found in the wool. One of the most likely places to have feed in the wool is around the head and neck.

On shearing day, you will want to be careful to keep the shearing area clean and free of hay and straw. Sweep shearing areas between sheep to remove any debris. Also, after the sheep are shorn, remove any tags (manure clumps) from the wool and any wool heavily infested with hay or plant material from the pasture. Wool should be packaged into large bags available from woolen mills and sheep supply companies. Do not place wool into plastic feed bags because the wool often becomes contaminated with pieces of the bag. These pieces are extremely difficult to remove and often end up in finished garments.

Check with your local sheep shearer or Extension Office for mills or wool pools to market your wool at. The location where you sell your wool may also have specifications for how they would like the wool packaged. Very few places nowadays ask for individual fleeces to be tied.

Where Can I Sell My Lambs?

One of the easiest places to sell your lambs is through a local auction barn. This is always a gamble because you never know what you will receive for your lambs. However, sometimes that gamble can work in your favor as well as against you. When taking lambs to the market, look for those times of the year when demand is high and you are more likely to receive higher prices. For example, Christmas and Easter are good times to sell your lambs. In addition, lambs are in demand during ethnic holidays such as Ramadan and Orthodox Easter.

Other options for selling lambs are to develop your own direct market. This might be selling freezer lambs, breeding stock, or feeder lambs to a feedlot. Other options are to produce a value-added product such as lamb stew or market your lamb through your own restaurant. Producing a unique product can also develop niche markets. Or, you may want to focus on organic lamb or range fed lamb. Use your ingenuity to come up with your own special product.

Closing Thoughts

Whether you raise purebred breeding stock or commercial lambs for market, you will need to sit down prior to getting started and make some decisions. Spend some time thinking about what you would like to do as well as developing a business and marketing plan. Developing the plans will help you to focus on the goals you wish to achieve as well as provide a valuable source of information to lenders if you plan to borrow money.



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This page last updated Tuesday, June 30, 2009 17:43

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