



# SHEEP SHEET

## Starting a Sheep Flock

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Livestock enterprises, especially dairy, poultry and now swine, require a very high capital investment to get started. Generally sheep are the exception.

Cattle, either as a new or an expanded venture, require a substantial capital investment in order to realize a reasonable income, and any profits could be a long time in coming.

Swine, while taking a fairly heavy investment to start, do have a relatively fast turnover, and hence should offer a quicker profit. However, the increased number of large-scale mega-corporations confinement enterprises has created a rather unstable market in recent years. This leaves the prospective livestock person with a third choice, sheep.

Small and intermediate sized sheep flocks are enjoying a degree of increasing popularity, while large-scale extensive range sheep operations continue to diminish.

If you are expanding your farm or ranch operation, but are working on a relatively limited budget, a sheep enterprise could be a primary consideration. Sheep can combine some of the best profit aspects of cattle, swine, poultry and even goats.

The initial capital investment for a viable sheep production unit is less than that required for a comparable profit in either cattle or swine. Although the market prices for lambs fluctuate during the year, they have been more stable than wool prices, especially since the 1996 withdrawal of the 'Wool Incentive Program' (National Wool Act of 1954).

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Sheep do not require the sophisticated management practices as compared to swine production. Sheep do not require fancy or expensive facilities to succeed. They need only to be cool and dry, with shelter for protection from adverse weather. A three-sided, closed, pole-type shed with a graded dirt floor, associated corrals and pens, and access to feed and water is all that is required. If winter lambing is to be practiced, a closed shelter should be considered.

Navajo sheep producers have unique production limitations on the Navajo Nation.



### TYPES OF ENTERPRISES:

There are many possibilities as to various types of sheep operations.

#### 1. Purebred Sheep Production

Purebreds are kept to produce foundation seedstock or breeding stock and the progeny are usually sold as registered lambs or yearlings of both sexes.

Because you will be competing with breeders who are well established you will have to raise progeny that are better. Your feeding, care, disease prevention, and fitting for shows and purebred sheep consignment sales must be near perfection. Your buildings and corrals must be good looking and well kept to attract prospective buyers.

Records and/or performance testing is a must to enable you to identify the most productive sheep in your flock. Enrollment in either your purebred sheep registry performance record keeping program or NSIP (National Sheep Improvement Program) should be considered a necessary requirement.

Perhaps one of the more critical activities leading to success in the purebred system is an aggressive advertising and public relations program.

## 2. Crossbred Ewe Production

Crossbreeding of sheep has been practiced for years in the United States. A cross-bred ewe is the progeny of two or more identified breeds or lines. Organized crossbreeding is important for the provision of replacement foundation ewes. It is well established that a two- or three-way crossbred ewe will produce more surviving lambs at weaning time. Opportunities continue to exist for the production of crossbred ewes for commercial flocks or operations.

## 3. Commercial Lamb Production

This is perhaps the most common sheep production practice.

Many sheep producers are now using a three-way and even four-way cross to produce commercial lambs. A good (crossbred) ewe is bred to a ram of a third identified breed or line. The ram may have any face color, but it must sire thrifty, early maturing lambs. In most instances this limits the selection to mainly the meat-type breeds, i.e. Suffolk, Hampshire and/or Dorset. However other breeds currently being utilized also include, the German Dorper, Dutch Texel, Polypay, and others.

## 4. Market Lamb Production (*Feedlot or Pasture-fed*)

This is also a very common sheep production system in suitable areas in the United States. Generally unfinished (weaners) lambs weighing between 50 and 70 pounds are purchased, confined, and finished on hay and grain or finished on alfalfa or other hay aftermath.

Corn silage with a protein supplement can also

be successfully fed. This permits a reduction in feeding costs provided the silage facilities are being used by some other livestock enterprise. Feeder or weaner lambs are generally purchased in the West in the fall and sold throughout the winter and early spring months.



Lambs should be fed in feeders off of the ground, particularly in confinement dry-lots.

## SELECTING BREEDING STOCK:

For best results take a successful sheep producer with you when you buy your breeding stock.

The ideal is a ewe that has had at least one lamb, but good two-year-old ewes that have shown they can lamb and have raised lambs are scarce. The next best thing is to buy good ewe lambs. More trouble is encountered at lambing with yearlings, particularly if you are just starting in the sheep business and are not an expert "lamb doctor." Make sure the ewe's udder is soft and pliable and has two well-developed teats. If you are buying older ewes, examine udders for missing teats that might have been snipped off during shearing.

When you are selecting a ram, it is best to buy one that has been performance tested and has passed a BSE (Breeding Soundness Evaluation) by a veterinarian. A performance-tested ram with a good rate of gain or good fleece traits is more likely to produce high quality lambs than one of unknown history.

Here are the main things to look for in buying breeding stock.

### Body

Look for ewes of good size with a sound mouth, good udder, and good feed and legs. Reject ewes which have a broken mouth (teeth missing), or a swollen or hard udder. Cull out any lame sheep.

Within the high-performance-tested animals, preference should be given to stock that has strong, broad, deep loins and legs well muscled down the hock, because this is where the greatest returns are obtained from the carcass.

### Wool

Examine the fleece for uniformity and denseness. Make sure the belly is covered with wool, with no bare patches. Make certain the wool is free from black and kempy fibers. Notice the skin. A bright pink color indicates a healthy animal.

### Head

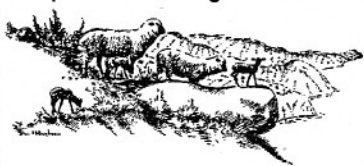
A strong, clean muzzle, an alert eye, and both the upper dental pad and the lower incisors of the mouth meet straight is preferred.

### Legs

The legs must be sound, strong, and with good feet.

One place to get breeding stock is from the fall sales that are held from August through December. Local extension agents, High School Vo-Ag teachers, and other sheep producers may have information and places where the sales are held. Or you can purchase your breeding stock from purebred breeders by private treaty.

Western range conditions require sheep with sound legs and hooves.



It's recommended to start with no more than 50 or 60 ewes the first year. You need to find out if you will like sheep and you will probably need experience to handle a larger flock or band. One person can easily handle 50 to 60 ewes without additional help other than a custom sheep shearer if necessary.

Once you have established your basic breeding flock and have bought your ram or rams (you need one ram for every 25 to 40 ewes) you can

increase your ewe flock by genetic selection based on performance test in the flock. The rams used the first years, if they produced the type of lamb you want, can be used the second year on your basic ewe flock, and a new ram on the ewe lambs. Select replacements from ewes which have twins and whose lambs grow rapidly to weaning and after weaning.

### BREEDING MANAGEMENT:

One common practice is to carry out a breeding program so lambs are finished for the early spring market - April to mid-June. This means that ewes must be bred in August and September.

The ewe doesn't need much care other than pasture or range from the time the lambs are weaned until just before breeding time. Just prior to breeding flush them, to help ovulate more eggs and increase the number of twin births. Flushing can be done in two ways.

- ✓ Turn the ewes into lush pasture at least two weeks before the ram(s) is turned in with them. Late seeded oats or some other green crop makes an excellent pasture for flushing.
- ✓ If lush pasture is not available, feed 3/4 to 1 lb. of whole oats, corn or barley per ewe per day from two weeks before breeding to two weeks after the breeding season starts.

Make sure each ewe is free from burrs, long wool, and other obstructions near the dock and vulva to insure that breeding will be completed (crutching out or tagging).

The gestation period of ewes is 145 to 150 days. If lambing is to start January 1, rams must be put in by August 1.

About three weeks before breeding starts, feed the ram a breeding ration or supplement (13 to 14 percent protein) at one-half (1/2) pound per day along with hay, pasture, or native range. If your breeding season is before September 1, shear the rams, and house them in cool quarters during the heat of the day. In a small flock (single sire mating) it helps to rotate them every day. This gives the ram(s) a chance to rest and can increase the fertility, especially in hot weather.

During breeding use ram markers to indicate the ewes bred. As the ram serves the ewe, he will mark her on the rump. By changing the color of the marker (light or dark) every 16 to 17 days, you can determine which ewes are returning in heat, what percentage of the ewes are settled, and the approximate lambing date of each ewe.

After breeding, remove the rams from the ewe flock to eliminate a scattered lamb crop, rough treatment of the ewes by the rams, and a fat sluggish ram. The ewes can stay on pasture during the fall and early winter. If snow prevents easy grazing, then hay or other roughage must be fed.



**LAMB MANAGEMENT:**

Forty (40) to fifty (50) days before lambing becomes general, crutch the ewes. Remove tags and sweat locks from around the udder, and the wool which may become tags during lambing, from around the vulva. If you have shelter and can keep ewes dry, this is a good time to shear. It makes lambing easier, and prevents the ewes from wandering about the range or pasture to lamb.



A ewe shorn before lambing also responds to changes in the weather, whereas an unshorn ewe is less inclined to do so. The shorn ewe being so sensitive to weather and ambient temperature conditions will more frequently save her lambs than an unshorn post-partum ewe with her lamb(s).

When lambing time is near, prepare individual 4' x 4' or 5' x 5' lambing 'jugs,' 'jails,' or pens. The lambing pens should be spread with straw or wood chips to absorb the moisture, and there should be a heat lamp to dry the lamb quickly to prevent it from becoming chilled. Leave the ewe

and lamb in the pen to become adjusted to one another for at least 48 to 72 hours. Twins should be left in the jugs (pens) longer than singles.

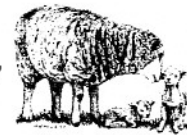
Dock (removed the tail) and castrate the lambs when they are 7 to 10 days old. Docking prevents the tail wool from getting wet or dirty, and reduces the change of fly maggots and other sanitation problems. Cut the tail off about 2 to 3 tail bone joints from the body. Push the skin on the tail toward the body before cutting. This lets loose skin cover the stub so the bone is not exposed. Disinfect the wounds and then check to see that the operation is healing properly.

**FUTURE OF U.S. SHEEP PRODUCTION:**

Sheep production is on the threshold of a new and promising future. Available extensive past research has not been synthesized into a meaningful and commingled recommendations for the sheep production of 2000 and beyond. Research into sheep breeds, new rearing systems, sheep dairying, new products, wool processing technology, alternative diets and rations, and value-added R & D creates an entirely new prospective producers and a vision for reinvigorated sheep and wool industry.

The sheep industry is one example of agricultural production which fails to meet even our domestic demands, which has allowed imports to be dumped as competing products. Sheep production holds a promise for a bright future and a sustainable industry.

**SHEEP - 'Nature's' most holistic domestic animal.**




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