

## **OPPORTUNITIES RAISING FEEDER LAMBS**

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As with any business, successful sheep operations routinely take time to inventory their resources and opportunities. This information can then be used to make changes (if warranted) in their operation to meet market demands. This may be done in a formal process but is more likely to be a continual process.

The sheep industry is changing. Sheep numbers in most of the United States are decreasing. Many flocks are being dissolved or decreased in size. This is especially true in the western states. One of the resulting effects has been a decrease in the availability of feeder lambs, making it harder for lamb feeders to purchase the number of feeder lambs they need.

This opens up the opportunity for sheep producers in Wisconsin to produce feeder lambs for sale to lamb feeders. Other factors making this possible are:

1. Geographic location:
  - reasonable distance to feedlots located in midwest states such as Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota and North Dakota.
2. Abundant feed available (especially forage)
3. Strong genetics available
4. A “sheep producing” climate
5. Strong producer base
6. Availability of resource information

Production of feeder lambs is not difficult, but it does require proper planning and management. The planning process needs to start prior to selecting the ram and ewes that will be used to produce the feeder lambs. Other decisions to make include:

1. Is the labor and time available?
2. What knowledge and skill needs to be developed?
3. If pastures will be used, will there be enough quality forage available?  
Is a grazing management plan designed/used?
4. When do you plan to market your feeders? (varied times may be profitable)
5. What does the buyer (lamb feeder) want?

The following are some of the guidelines to follow if you plan to market Choice and Fancy feeder lambs.

1. Market ewe or castrated ram lambs
2. Dock tails
3. Market lambs ranging from 60 to 85 pounds
4. Have a deworming program
5. Administer overeating shots
6. Keep pelts clean and free of burdocks
7. Produce lambs with “growability”
8. Market at an age that will give time to finish the lambs while they will still grade as lambs rather than lower value yearling mutton
9. Market uniform groups of lambs
10. Wean the lambs and accustom them to grain
11. Avoid non-scourable paints and markers

Producers selling feeder lambs may find they have a surplus of feed on hand that would normally be used to finish lambs to a slaughter weight and condition. This will provide the opportunity to produce more lambs. This can be done by increasing the lambing percent, using an accelerated lambing program or adding more ewes.

The fastest way would be to add more ewes to the flock. The increased numbers could be kept year around or purchased prior to lambing and sold after the lambs are weaned. Short term western ewes may fit the later plan for experienced producers.

Although uniform large groups of ewes are occasionally available in-state, producers may choose to purchase “western” ewes. These ewes are adaptable to farm flock management systems and can be used very successfully, however, they will need to adjust. The producer may also need to adapt to these ewes. They may be of a different breed than the existing flock.

These comments are not made to discourage, but rather to allow for planning which will lead to success. Marketing agencies, with their system of contacts, are a source of ewes from both in and out of state.

The marketing of feeder lambs needs to be planned. A producer needs to consider when the feed lot wishes to purchase lambs and coordinate this with their own resources and management system.

Producer profitability hinges on a marketing method that is efficient, accurate, timely and competitive. The method needs to allow for the grouping of similar lambs from two or more producers to form a uniform load. Semi-truck load lots of lambs are the most profitable.

The key to successfully marketing the lambs is to offer them competitively to as many prospective buyers as possible. Computerized Auction Marketing, such as that of Equity

Cooperative Livestock Sales Association, will allow everyone with a terminal as well as all other interested parties to bid via telephone. Price discovery is determined by “real time” auction marketing, allowing honest price discovery. After the auction, Equity then coordinates the delivery date/times/trucks/facilities to be used and the market evaluation of the lambs from the producer to the buyer. All payments are made to the producer with a licensed/bonded check. Collections from the buyer become the responsibility of the marketing agency.

Each farm and sheep operation varies. Therefore, it is very important for a producer to “sharpen up their pencil” and budget out the different options for their farm before converting to feeder lamb production. However, the time is right to give feeder lamb production some thought.

Anyone wanting more information about feeder lamb production and marketing as well as obtaining consistent groups of ewes (local or out of state) are invited to call Equity Cooperative Livestock Sales Association at 800-362-3989.