

## SOMETHING'S NOT QUITE RIGHT...

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It is a fact that, when compared to other meat, the consumption of lambs and mutton per capita in the United States is low (lambs/mutton 1.5 lbs, beef and veal 97 lbs, pork 65 lbs, poultry 95 lbs). After dropping sharply from 5 lbs. per capita in 1962, the consumption of lamb and mutton has been fairly steady or slightly on the rise since 1975 (Whipple and Meukhaus, *SID Journal*, 1988, vol. 5, no. 1).

On the other hand, since 1970 the US population has grown by 62 million inhabitants reaching 268 millions in 1996 and predicted to reach 298 millions in 2010 at the current growth of 2.8 million people a year (US Census Bureau).

During the same period of time, the US breeding ewe population declined from slightly less than 8 million to 5 million in 1996 with a number of lambs marketed per ewe of .73 in the 1970's and .87 in the 1990s. The average carcass weight of lambs also increased from 50 pounds in the late 70s to 60 pounds in the 90s.

Now, if mathematics are right, the supply of lamb in the late 70s was 288 million pounds for a demand of 300 million. In 1996, the domestic supply was around 261 million pounds for a possible demand of 320 million (1.2 lb./capita). Therefore, importation of lamb, that was practically nonexistent in 1970, increased tremendously in the last decade or so. The total importation of lamb and mutton in 1996 reached 67 million pounds or 26% of the domestic production (Meyer and Anderson, *SID Journal*, 1998, vol 14, no. 1). If the number of lambs produced in the US does not increase and considering the ever-growing population, the supply of domestic lamb meat will be short by 96 million pounds in 2010, corresponding to 1.6 million, 120 pound lambs. If nothing is done about it, this void will be filled by an ever-increasing importation of foreign lambs, and the US sheep industry will be dead.

It appears, then, that the main problem lies as much in the production of the domestic supply as in a low demand. Therefore, three main priorities should be seriously taken into consideration by US sheep producers, be they purebred breeders, commercial breeders or small scale producers.

### **Priority 1: Increase the number of lambs marketed per ewe bred.**

Although some progress has been made in the last 20 years, it has not been sufficient. Technologies have been developed that would allow producers to increase their lamb output by 40% to 50% with minimal efforts. Universities, extension services, and the Sheep Association have been organizing seminars, conferences, and field days with good attendance, but with little results in their preaching. What have they been preaching?

- Reduction of lamb mortality by better nutrition of ewes, better management, tube feeding of lambs, vaccination, supplementation, efficient use of coccidiostats, artificial rearing... Why do we still have lamb mortality over 20% (due to causes other than predation)?
- Use of highly productive breeds of sheep. There is no denying that the importation of the Finnish Landrace breed in the late 60s had a significant impact on the US sheep

industry. Since then, other breeds have been made available to the producers (Romanov, Boroola, Barbados, St. Croix). More often than not, because of a lesser wool quality (or lack of) prolific breeds have been laughed at, mocked and largely ignored by a large segment of the industry. Yet it is well known that the number of lambs marketed per ewe is the number one trait in the profitability of any sheep enterprise, large or small.

- Use of accelerated lambing systems in order to produce more lambs per ewe per year. Some excellent management systems have been widely distributed, but few producers have actually taken advantage of it.
- Use of NSIP (National Sheep improvement Program) EPDs to select the best productive ewes, the best ram lambs, etc. of the 5 million breeding ewes in this country. Currently, no more than 10,000 are enrolled in NSIP, yet it is the best selection tool we ever had to improve the quality of our breeding stock. All sheep producers of the world are organizing themselves into Group Breeding Schemes in order to quickly respond to the consumer demands or to the commercial producer demands. What are we doing in the US?
- Diversification of the systems of production. Winter lambing, spring lambing, fall lambing, confinement, semiconfinement, or extensive management should coexist harmoniously in order to have a uniform lamb supply throughout the year. Yet in the last decade the dangerous trend of uniformity of system geared toward spring lamb production seems to have made great stride in the name of cost reduction. Cost reduction, however, is a far cry from being synonymous with cost effectiveness. Farm flock owners seem to have forgotten that the US is blessed with a large and cheap supply of high quality grain that made its beef meat famous worldwide.

## **Priority 2. Have a good supply of high quality lambs throughout the entire year.**

McMillan and Lemon (*The Shepherd*, December 1992) noted that, starting in 1985, the variability of lambs slaughtered from month to month has been reduced by almost half, and that the monthly number of lambs has become more evenly spread throughout the year. Good news? Maybe not. The same authors also noted that substantially heavier lambs were slaughtered. In Colorado, slaughter weights of lambs increased 21.6% in the last decade. This means that feedlots owned by packers are spreading the slaughter of lambs more evenly throughout the year by retaining more lambs (thus heavier weights) to the detriment of quality. Jeremiah et al. (1997, *SID Journal*, Vol. 13, no. 1) specifically concluded that in order to obtain a leaner product with higher yield of high value cuts, lambs should be slaughtered at younger ages and higher weights.

The attitude of lamb feeders and packers is quite comprehensible. Since nothing is coming forth from the producers, they had to find some substitutes to even out the production. The results may be a less attractive domestic lamb, lower prices, and an increased demand for lamb imports.

Each of us, as a producer, is individually responsible for this situation. With the advance of knowledge in physiology of reproduction, the adequate use of increasingly available supplies (CIDR's, pessaries, PMSG, melatonin), techniques (ram effect), and the use of breeds with an extended breeding season (Romanov, Dorset, Rambouillet, Hair sheep), we can have a very successful out-of-season or year-round lamb production.

### **Priority 3. Produce lamb of a consistent quality.**

This is a very sore point. The “Fresh American Lamb” is not so great. We have been told many times that the American lamb is the best in the world and we have ended up believing it. Each lamb taken individually might be excellent to eat, but the diversity of format, size, conformation of the overall production is such that the consumer does not find it very attractive (except for some niche markets).

The lack of incentive to produce a more uniform lamb is certainly to blame. Actually, all lambs falling into a certain weight range are paid the same regardless of conformation and fatness. A better grading and payment system should be put in place. Hopefully, the time will come and the producer should be ready for it by:

- Making better use of good terminal sires. After having chosen the type of maternal breed best suited for the environment and resources, the producer should use the “best of the best” of the terminal sires. There are only three or four breeds in the US that would qualify for such a denomination. It is the responsibility of the purebred breeders to develop an animal that corresponds to the consumer satisfaction rather than to please the judge of the local, state or national shows. All purebred producers should be enrolled in NSIP, or in a Group Breeding Scheme, in order to give objective and comparative information. Commercial producers would be willing to pay a much higher price for rams that are known “improvers”. No rams or ewes should be accepted in a show if they do not have an inter-flock EPD. Why is it that some rams can be worth tens of thousands of dollars in Australia?
- Developing a feeding system that would allow those crossbred lambs to grow quickly with a minimum deposition of fat.

In the June 1995 issue of *“The Shepherd,”* Paul Rodgers of ASI wrote: “The nostalgic essence of our industry attracted many of us to it and kept us there (...) In a 1989 national survey, producers (...) ranked personal preference for the sheep enterprise as their most important reason for wanting to expand or stay in the business.” Nostalgia is synonym of reminiscence of the past, a refusal of the future. Is that a fair description of the American shepherd? Maybe so. How else can we explain the rapid decline of a thriving industry at the same time that the world was changing forever? Sheep producers, kept busy with dog talks, shearing techniques, fairs and shows, and in adopting a few techniques of doubtful value, always refused to make profound modifications in their management, in their choice of breeds, in adopting NSIP, and in adopting real techniques that would have made a difference and keeping them afloat in a fast changing world. It is not too late to reverse the trend (or is it?). Let’s provide the meat industry with a sufficient supply of high quality lambs through the entire year and let’s help it to develop new lamb products that are appealing to the modern consumer. Purcell (*SID Journal*, 1995, vol. 11, no. 3) states that it is the producer that is concerned about the viability of his industry, and it is the producer that will have to prompt the needed changes.