

Experience with Pasture Lambing
Werner and Diane Haas
Springfield Meadow Sheep Farm
Taylor, Wisconsin

We farm in western Jackson County where the soil is sandy and the terrain hilly. We pasture 105 open acres on the home farm and have another farm of 80 acres, of which 45 acres are hay, and the rest is pasture for our herd of beef cattle. We have been in sheep production for 27 years, trying many different types of lambing schedules over the years.

A. Why pasture lamb?

1. To get cost of production down.

Like most commercial producers, we have very little control over the prices that we get for our product. These good prices that we have seen over the last few years can go south in a hurry. Then, are we ready for lower prices? There is a lot we can do to control cost of production. On this farm since the 1980's, our cost of production to get a lamb to market has been cut by 50%.

2. The highest cost of production is energy, whether it is human, fossil or solar energy. Of these three, human energy has the highest cost followed by fossil energy. When using these two energy sources in large amounts in sheep production, you can get optimum production but a very low net return, if any returns in the black – at least on this farm. On a flock of 200 to 300 ewes, over time, this system will burn you out, plus there will be very little left over for the pocketbook.

That is why we switched to a pasture lambing system. It cuts way back on these two energy systems. The lowest cost of production on this farm utilizes the solar energy system – solar energy grows grass into feed and uses that feed to produce market lambs.

B. Things to get ready for pasture lambing.

1. We think that any breed could lamb on pasture. We do know that some breeds would take a lot different management. On this farm to make this work, we try to keep it simple. We choose to stay away from the high-energy breeds and the prolific breeds because, with our management, we saw that these breeds did not work.
2. We planned for pasture lambing 5 to 6 years before we actually did it. On our old system, we were at 190 to 200% lamb crop. Over those six years of preparation for pasture lambing, we started selecting ewe lambs that came from mothers that lambed by themselves with no assistance. We started selling ewes that needed assistance, had big teats and udders, needed high energy intake, and had high

prolificacy genetics in them. We sold ewes that were hard to work with or ewes that would find ways to get through a fence.

3. Next we decided that you need good grass production for this system. We did this through intensive pasture management. Our pastures currently are very good, but there is always room for improvement.
4. Your flock will need protection from predators. We did this with llamas and guard dogs, and this has been working very well.
5. We chose lambing to start when our grass was just starting to grow, and then during the lambing period, reached its highest rate of growth. We decided on May 10th, which also should be when the weather improves for lambing.

C. Things we do for pasture lambing.

1. We shear the first full week in April. That way the ewe has a little growth of wool in order to put up with weather adversity during lambing time. We will also deworm the ewes at this time and then again May 1st in order to start with clean lambing pastures.
2. On about April 16th, we put our ewes through a fast pace of intensive grazing till the start of lambing. It is amazing how fast they gain in condition at this time.
3. At the start of lambing, we have a 40-acre field that we set up into 5 different paddocks. We sort out any ewes and ewe lambs that we think are not going to lamb. Then we set stock 55 pregnant ewes in each paddock. They stay in their paddock till lambing is done.
4. We process the lambs when they are born. So far this has not worked out the best. We are working to improve this. Maybe the shepherd needs to be smarter than the sheep! We did purchase some sires from breeders that have used this system for a longer time than us in hopes of improving the temperament of our future ewes.

D. Things that we like so far about pasture lambing.

1. A larger net return, a lot less human and fossil energy use, a big improvement in sheep health, and a lot less prepared feed required on this farm each year with pasture lambing.
2. We have less lambing difficulties than when winter lambing, fewer ewe deaths, less lamb deaths, and fewer bummer lambs.
3. Even though we lamb a month later than in our last system, we have heavier lambs now by Oct. 15. For 2005, our lambs as feeders averaged 87 pounds compared to 80 to 85 pounds with the old system.

4. The thing I like the most is no getting up at night during lambing like we did when lambing in buildings.

E. Things we don't like about pasture lambing.

1. You have very little control of the sheep. On this farm, our pastures are way too high in protein. Towards the end of lambing, the ewes with singles have way too big a lamb. We did have 5 lambs born dead, lost two ewes, and crippled one ewe because of this. To try to solve this, we are going to lamb five days earlier when there is not quite as much grass growth. Also, we are trying to promote more grass and less clover to get our protein down.
2. So far it is harder to process the lambs on pasture. If you wait until the end of lambing, there are fly problems. To solve this, we might shorten our breeding season from 6 weeks to 3 weeks to shorten our lambing period. Ewes that are not bred during the 3 weeks in the fall will be rebred in the spring for fall lambs. We are also hoping that the ewes will shorten their lambing period with time.
3. You are at the mercy of the weather in Wisconsin whenever you lamb, and this is more of a problem with pasture lambing.
4. You have to be more aware of predator problems.

One thing that we notice is that any problems that come up seem like bigger problems with pasture lambing, but when you sit down and take out your data book and compare notes, there actually are fewer problems and grief with pasture lambing than with lambing in pens. As our Amish friend who helps us once in awhile said after comparing notes over the two systems, "There is no turning back. We only have to improve the system we have now".

In time we would like to have our sheep flock act more like a beef herd – within reason. That way, God willing, we can be raising sheep till we are in our 80's. We are in our 60's now, so we only have 20 years left to get this right. By the time we get this right, we may be six feet under pushing up daisies for the sheep to eat.

We would like someone with more experience with pasture lambing than us to make a video during lambing to sell, so that somebody getting into this could benefit from the experiences of a successful pasture lambing operation.