

SHEEP PRODUCTION IN CACHE COUNTY

Sheep have always been an important agricultural industry in the State of Utah. Sheep have the ability to convert feed from large acreages of range and forest lands into meat and wool that can be used by humans. Total numbers of sheep in the Western states has dropped significantly over the years. According to Utah agricultural statistics, we have 245,000 breeding sheep in the state now as compared to 360,000 only five years ago. Depressed wool prices and significant predator losses have made it difficult for many sheep men to stay in the business.

The majority of Cache County sheep are raised in small farm flocks. They have proven to be a good livestock option for individuals with limited acreage and a desire to have animals of some kind. Lambs make wonderful 4-H projects and can generate respectable profits for a relatively minor investment. An increasing percentage of our population enjoys eating lamb and the wool is easily marketed through our cooperative County wool pool. The USDA office also has programs that enhance the production of sheep. The livestock assistance program and wool and mohair programs are examples of federal encouragement to maintain or increase our sheep numbers.

Most farm flock lambs are born during the winter or early spring months so that they can be marketed before the lambs that are born in larger herds on the range. Proper care of the ewes and lambs prior to and during the lambing season is critical for any economic return to a producer. Nutrition, facilities, cleanliness and careful monitoring of the animals are all areas that need additional attention during the lambing season.

The last six weeks of gestation are especially critical for pregnant ewes. They must be handled carefully and they must be fed well. Seventy percent of the growth of the unborn lamb occurs during this time period. Experts suggest that ewes should gain about 20 pounds during this six week period to prevent pregnancy disease. Adequate nutrition of the ewe will also insure stronger lambs at birth, increase milk production and promote a stronger mothering instinct. It is wise to supplement ewes with additional energy during the last six weeks of pregnancy and into the lactation period. Rolled barley or corn is a good choice as energy sources.

Another management practice that will enhance lambing success is crutching. Crutching consists of shearing the wool from around the dock and udder of the ewe. Crutched ewes stay cleaner and are easier to handle at lambing time. It is also easier for the newborn lambs to nurse. Often times too much wool around the udder makes it difficult for new lambs to find the nipples on the ewe's udder. Extreme care must be taken to avoid physical injury to heavy pregnant ewes when the wool is being removed. In addition to gentle handling, ewes should not be crowded through narrow passageways or doors.

As the lambing season begins, a careful shepherd will almost live with the flock. The majority of lamb losses result from owner neglect. Difficult births, lambs that are mismothered or exposure to the elements are the most common causes of lamb deaths in small farm flocks. Predator losses are a major issue with larger range flocks.

Much time and labor can be saved by separating ewes that are close to lambing from those that are not ready to lamb soon. Ewes that are about ready to lamb can be placed together in pens where the producer can direct careful attention to their care. It may occasionally be necessary to gently assist ewes that are having difficulty delivering lambs. After the lambs are born the membranes should be removed from around their mouth and nose and possibly assistance may be needed to help them start breathing. Navel cords should be treated with 7 % iodine and the lambs should be assisted in getting colostrum from their mother soon after birth. If the weather is cold it may be necessary to provide external heat until the lambs are totally dry. It is always wise to place the ewe and her new lambs in an individual pen for a few days until they become accustomed to each other. If adequate preparations are made in advance, lambing can be a very rewarding task.

Utah sheep and goat producers will be interested in attending the annual Sheep and Goat Day that is again co-sponsored by the Utah Wool Growers Association and USU Extension. We will meet January 21, 2006, at the Sheraton City Centre, 150 West 500 South, in Salt Lake City. The meetings begin at 8:30 a.m. with parking available north and west of the hotel. Registration and lunch costs are \$20 for individuals or \$30 for couples. College students, 4-H and FFA members are free except for a lunch fee of \$5. College credit is also available for those who may have an interest.

A series of topics will be presented during the general session and in breakout sections. John Helle, commercial sheep producer from Montana, will speak on "Leading Edge Management", Stan Portratz, of Iowa, will address "Basics of Sheep and Goat Handling and Psychology", and Dr Jay Bobb, Minnesota, will teach "Advanced Lambing and Kidding Hisbandry". Additional issues include nutrition, fencing and facilities, predator control and wool testing.

Individuals who plan on attending this event are invited to call the Extension office (752-6263) if you have an interest in car pooling rides. Friendly discussion driving to and from the seminar may prove to be a valuable part of the experience.