1966

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Early
South Dakota Lambs

Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
United States Department of Agriculture
Early South Dakota Lambs

Sheep are suitable to the general plan of operation on thousands of South Dakota farms where the land is well drained, acreage can supply the pasture needed, and farmers want to diversify operations.

Producing early spring lambs has been one of the most profitable enterprises on South Dakota farms. Choice spring lambs sold on the late May and early June market have never been in over supply. With good management and careful attention, a flock of ewes bred for early lambs will return an excellent profit from low investment with comparatively little interference with other farm labor.

The two crops—lambs and wool—can add extra dollars to your income and assure more efficient returns on feed and labor.

In general two systems of lamb raising are practical in South Dakota—late winter-early spring and late spring. The system used depends on availability of labor, facilities, equipment, and the producers own preference. This fact sheet deals with early lamb production—lambs born before March 1 and sold on the market as slaughter lambs before July 1.

Advantages of early lamb production:
1. Ewes lamb during January and February when more labor is available.
2. Lambs go to market before the extreme mid-summer heat.
3. Average price for market lambs is normally at a high during May and June.
4. Internal parasite problems generally are not as severe.

Disadvantages of early lamb production:
1. More breeding problems may be encountered during August breeding.
2. Requires more adequate building, facilities, and equipment during the lambing period.

The following steps, properly carried out, should assure success in early lamb production.

1. Select Breeding Stock Carefully.

   Ewes—All permanent improvement is based on selection of breeding stock and systematic culling. Experiments indicate that large framed ewes (similar to those found throughout Western South Dakota) produce more lambs and suckle them more satisfactorily than small ewes. Weight of ewes as yearlings just before first breeding is a fairly accurate indication of the birth and weaning weights of lambs they will produce. The Agricultural Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicates that heavier ewes, regardless of breed or wool type, produce heavier, faster growing lambs than light weight ewes. Experimental work indicates that the owner of a farm flock of sheep might make his greatest profit by running medium or fine wool ewes (Rambouillet, Corriedale, Columbia, Shropshire, and Targhee) and breeding them to Hampshire or Suffolk rams.

   Rams—Cheap rams are not usually a bargain. Select rams carefully and systematically. A ram that has done well under a performance test program should be considered.

   Select a thick, deep bodied, well balanced, fast growing purebred yearling ram with a lot of natural meatiness. He will sire lambs that fatten quickly and top the late May and June market.

2. Breed in August or Early September.

   Flush ewes by turning them on a good lush green pasture 2 to 3 weeks before breeding. Turn ram with ewes the first of August.

3. Check Ram’s Fertility, Obtain Breeding Dates.

   High temperature during the summer is detrimental to high fertility and normal semen production of the ram. Shearing rams 6 to 8 weeks in advance of breeding and again at breeding time will generally be very beneficial.

   High humidity is as detrimental as high temperatures. If both occur during the breeding season, turn the rams, even though sheared, with the ewes only at night.

   Use a marking harness or ochre on the ram with color changed every 17 days. This will give you an indication of the fertility of the ram. If most of the ewes repeat, the ram is probably infertile. Breeding dates can also be determined by the use of a marking harness.
4. Cut Feed Costs With Roughage.

A sheep’s stomach is a manufacturing plant designed to utilize roughage. Corn fields and grain stubble during the fall and early winter provide excellent feed. Follow this period by feeding a ration of 4 to 6 pounds of good alfalfa hay daily or similar amounts of prairie or tame hay. If prairie or tame hay is used, a protein supplement (one-tenth to one-fourth pound soybean oilmeal or similar protein feeds) will generally be needed to balance the ration. Corn or sorghum silage (8 to 11 pounds daily) may be used but will need to be balanced by using alfalfa hay or protein supplement. Feed ½ to ¾ pound corn or oats daily during last 30 days before lambing along with roughage rations listed above.

Always provide a mineral mixture of equal parts salt and steamed bonemeal or the equivalent for ewes.

5. Ewes Require Good Management.

Pregnant ewes should gain 20 to 30 pounds from breeding to lambing.

Provide for exercise during the winter.

Provide plenty of clean ice-free water.

Several weeks before lambing, crotch out ewes and remove wool from faces. If adequate shelter is available before and during lambing, some producers may wish to complete the entire shearing operation prior to lambing.

6. Efficiency Is the Key.

Housing for a farm flock need not be expensive. A dry, well ventilated shelter open to the south is quite adequate for wintering ewes.

Provide warm, draft-free quarters during and for several days after lambing. Lambing pens 3 x 4 feet or 4 x 4 feet will generally pay for themselves in saved lambs and will prevent trouble with disowned lambs.

Plan your labor program so that you will be available to help ewes during the lambing period. Heat lamps will prevent chilled lambs and must be provided during severe weather.

7. Saved Lambs Increase Returns.

A 140 to 160% lamb crop generally means very favorable returns. Producers must strive to attain or surpass a 140% lamb crop. Be present when ewes lamb.


Dock and castrate lambs at 7 to 10 days. Disinfect wounds, and check lambs frequently to insure against excessive bleeding. Use Smear EQ 335 or a similar product on open wounds during the fly season.


Feed ewes a milk-producing ration. A pound to one-half of a mixture of corn, corn and oats, and one-tenth to one-fourth pound of soybean meal is an adequate daily ration for ewes fed good legume hay.

Many excellent rations can be prepared and must be fed to the lambs for maximum growth. Average daily consumption for lambs self-fed a complete creep ration for a period of 10 days to 120 days is about 1½ pounds. Lambs will be eating about 3 pounds daily at 4 months. Approximately 200 to 250 pounds of feed is required to take a lamb from birth to market.

10. Early Weaning of Lambs.

Milk production of the ewe starts decreasing at about 4 weeks after lambing. At 12 weeks, the ewe is producing less than half of her starting production; therefore, the lamb’s nutritive requirements must be met with feed other than milk.

Considerable research has been conducted to study the effect of early weaning on lamb performance. Weaning early-born (January and February) lambs at 10 to 12 weeks is now becoming accepted by more and more sheepmen. However, drylot feeding makes a minimum use of pasture and does not fit into the feeding program of sheepmen who may have an abundance of excellent pasture. If this is the situation, the use of pasture with lamb creeps will no doubt still be the most satisfactory program to follow.

11. Shear and Handle the Wool Properly.

The manner in which the wool clip is “harvested” and prepared for market has a direct bearing on the price the sheep producer will receive. Do not allow the wool to become matted with mud and manure. Be sure fleeces are dry before shearing and store wool in a dry place. Avoid second cuts when removing the fleece. Shear on a clean floor. Separate black fiber fleeces, burry wool tags, and sweat locks from the top grade wool. Use only paper twine when tying fleece.

12. Peak Market Comes in May and June.

The 10-year average monthly slaughter lamb prices on Chicago market indicate that May and June are the two peak market months. Sell all lambs that are fat and weigh at least 85 pounds during these months. If
lambs are receiving abundant milk and feeds, they will usually be fat and heavy enough to hit these peak market months. Early lambs produced under excellent management and feeding programs should weigh 85 to 100 pounds at 4 to 4½ months.

13. Control Parasites.

A year around parasite control program must be established. This program will include the use of recommended drench mixtures (thiabendazole, phenothiazine, lead arsenate, or copper-nicotine sulphate) for controlling internal parasites. Each producer must follow a definite systematic program if the flock is to remain free from parasites.

Spray, dust, or dip sheep for lice and ticks. Use any one of the following insecticides: lindane, methoxychlor, toxaphene, Co-Ral (Bayer 21/199), or dieldrin. (See South Dakota Insecticide Recommendations as a guide for proper use of insecticides.) After shearing and between September 1 and November 1 are the recommended times for treating these external parasites.

Tag ewes in the summer to prevent maggots.
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A 1 to 3 lb. lamb may be fed in a 4 to 8 week period of time. The late fall is an ideal time. Lambs may be weaned and sold before December 1. The 10 year average price of South Dakota Lamb has been $2.00 per pound.