

New Best Practices Aim to Increase Productivity for Lamb Producers

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.

Lamb producers were introduced to the industry's first set of Productivity Best Practices at the 2016 Sheep Industry Convention January 27-30.

Lambs sold per ewe is the biggest influence on profitability, and implementing the new Best Practices to Increase Your Lamb Crop gives sheep producers more control over price volatility, according to the panel of sheep producers and production experts who developed the best practices.

"The long-term vision is to increase demand and profitability for the entire U.S. lamb industry," says Wes Patton, a California sheep producer who chairs the American Lamb Board. "As demand is increased over time, we want more American Lamb on more consumers' plates. That involves improving consistency and quality, while increasing productivity and reducing costs of production. By using best practices,



The U.S. Lamb Industry Roadmap, adopted less than two years ago, set goals to achieve the long-term vision of increasing demand and profitability for the entire U.S. lamb industry. Improving consistency and quality, while increasing productivity and reducing costs of production, are requirements in order for more American Lamb to be on more consumers' plates. By using best practices, the U.S. Lamb Industry can implement change that leads to increased demand and profitability. Find out more at www.LambResourceCenter.com.

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The American Lamb Board, which administers the lamb checkoff, supported

the efforts to develop the lamb crop best practices in collaboration with other industry groups, including the American Sheep Industry Association's "Let's Grow" program.

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12 Lamb Crop Best Practices

- ◆ **Optimal Nutrition.** Prior to breeding, ewes should be fed a ration that puts them on track for appropriate weight gain. When breeding ewes, they should have a body condition score of 3 or slightly less. Throughout gestation, be sure to meet the nutritional requirements of your bred ewes. Following lambing and through weaning, maintain ewes on quality feed that takes into account factors such as the number of lambs they are rearing. At any stage of production, consider sorting ewes into groups based on body condition in order to allocate feed to dietary needs.
- ◆ **Breed Ewe Lambs at 7 to 9 Months of Age.** If managed properly, ewe lambs should be able to lamb at or near their first birthday. Ewes that give birth to their first lamb before they are yearlings tend to be more productive throughout their lifetime compared to those that first lamb as yearlings. When considering this best practice, keep in mind that different breeds of sheep vary in age of puberty.
- ◆ **Select for Prolific Genetics.** Select for prolific genetics within rams that produce offspring you will be considering for replacements. Similarly, replacement ewe lambs should be selected from high performing dams. Estimated breeding values (EBVs) produced by the National Sheep Improvement Program (NSIP) are an excellent tool to accomplish this goal.
- ◆ **Use Crossbreeding.** First-cross lambs tend to have a 5% higher survival rate than straight-bred lambs, given that genetics are matched with environment. In addition, first-cross ewes tend to have higher lamb crops than purebred sheep.
- ◆ **Cull Underperforming Ewes.** Identify and cull ewes that fail to rear a lamb, rear a single-born lamb that is below average in quality and/or weight, fail to rear twins, or lamb outside the first or second heat cycle. Exceptions may be made for reasons outside the ewe's control.
- ◆ **Reduce Lamb Loss.** Postnatal lamb loss should be kept below 10% of all lambs born. Identify best management practices for flock health, predator prevention, protection from severe weather conditions, and other factors that will improve lamb survival. Most non-predator lamb loss occurs within the first week, so management decisions during this time period can have large impacts on flock profitability.
- ◆ **Test for Pregnancy Status.** Determine pregnancy status via ultrasound. Cull open ewes or market ewe lambs prior to lambing season. Group and feed ewes according to the number of lambs they are raising and stage of pregnancy.
- ◆ **Disease Prevention and Treatment.** Work with your veterinarian or consultant to develop an overall health management plan to prevent or eradicate disease, such as aborting agents or chronic disease, which have a negative impact on reproductive efficiency.
- ◆ **Match Reproduction to Management.** Your goals for flock reproductive efficiency will vary depending on nutritional and labor resources. However, increasing reproductive efficiency should be a primary goal for most flocks.
- ◆ **Test Rams.** Don't overlook ram fertility. Check all rams using a general breeding soundness exam 30 to 60 days prior to breeding. Semen test all rams, or at least any rams that are suspect following a physical exam. Observing rams for breeding activity is another consideration.
- ◆ **Manage for Seasonal Changes in Reproduction.** Pregnancy and lambing rate are reduced in ewes that are bred outside the normal breeding season. Ovulation rates peak during October and November in the northern hemisphere. Genetics, improved nutritional management, ram effect, light treatment, and/or hormone therapy can assist in meeting aseasonal breeding goals.
- ◆ **Accelerate Lambing Cycles.** For flocks with management practices which allow for more than one lambing season per year, accelerated lambing can improve reproductive efficiency. There are multiple accelerated lambing programs. Identify the program that fits your flock and resources.

To make best practice information as accessible as possible, it is part of the new U.S. Lamb Resource Center website (www.LambResourceCenter.com). Funded by the national lamb checkoff program to support the efforts of the entire industry, the Lamb Resource Center pulls together important information from major sheep organizations into one central location. Topics on the site include the lamb checkoff, industry and market news, marketing, Productivity Best Practices, and other production resources.

Best practices are a cornerstone of many industries – from computer manufacturing to education – and guide processes to achieve a desired result. For the lamb industry, Productivity Best Practices identify ways to produce more with comparable resources, which is a critical component of profitability.

“Because they are based on both time-tested practical experience and research, the Best Practices to Increase Your Lamb Crop are reliable, worthwhile actions for U.S. sheep producers. Best practices help you find ways to be more efficient and allow you to take more control of your flock’s productivity – actions you can take now to protect against price volatility,” says Reid Redden, Ph.D., who chaired the team charged with developing the best practices.

Redden emphasizes even though

sheep production practices in the U.S. vary, there are lamb crop best practices that will benefit every flock. Most sheep producers will be able to identify at least three of the 12 best practices that will help them gain efficiency and improve profitability.

For example, the lamb crop best practice topics include optimizing nutrition, selecting prolific genetics, culling underperforming ewes, pregnancy testing, disease prevention and reducing lamb loss. Another best practice involves breeding ewe lambs at the age of seven to nine months so they lamb at or near their first birthday. Research shows ewes that give birth to their first lamb before they are yearlings tend to be more productive throughout their lifetime compared to those that first lamb as yearlings. Yet, Redden points out, in this case, the specific practice requires management considerations that may not be an option for every flock.

“Our team recognizes that some of the lamb crop best practices mean challenging the status quo. Yet, that is what is required to take action so the U.S. lamb industry can be more competitive,” Redden says.

Key indicators have also been developed to help

identify which lamb crop best practices will be most beneficial for various production styles. For example, a range flock should have no more than seven to 10 percent of dry ewes, whereas a farm flock should have no more than five to seven percent.

“Best practices are an important way to implement the changes identified in the U.S. Lamb Industry Roadmap. These best practices will help increase demand while driving profitability for all industry segments,” concluded Patton.

The American Lamb Board (ALB) is a national promotion, research and information organization whose purpose is to strengthen the position of lamb and lamb products in domestic and foreign markets. The work of the Board is overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Agriculture Marketing. For more information, go to www.LambResourceCenter.com.



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