

KY Sheep CHECK-OFF

Aids Shearer Shortage in Kentucky



by Kathy Meyer

Shortages of sheep shearers nationwide are described to be at a crisis level by many industry leaders. In 2019 Kentucky Sheep and Wool Producers Association submitted a request for \$4,750.00 to the Kentucky Sheep and Goat Council to utilize check-off funds to implement the Kentucky Shearing Mentorship and Apprenticeship Project. The goal of the project is to help address the shearer crisis here in KY.

The KY Sheep and Goat Council funded the project in late summer 2019. Project objectives included 1) improving the availability of professional sheep shearers in KY and 2) improving the wool crop thus increasing profits for wool breed sheep producers. Getting the wool crop sheared off properly and timely is key to marketing it for top dollar. Also sheep industry business leaders are concerned about preserving the wool breed flocks and their vast genetic pool. Out of sheer (not so funny play on words) frustration thousands of US sheep operations have switched to raising hair breeds to avoid shearing, a necessary management practice that has become a nightmare for small wool flock owners. In 2019 for example, 9 out of 10 sheep sold at Producers Livestock Auction in San Angelo, Texas were hair sheep. Texas was primarily

a wool breed state 10 years ago and one of the biggest wool producing states in the US, but no longer.

The Kentucky Shearing Mentor and Apprenticeship Project had two phases in its work plan. The first phase, a selection process, involved recruiting and interviewing qualified professionally known shearer candidates to be hired as a mentor and selecting 2 candidates for the apprenticeship. Two candidates were considered for the mentor position and 4 potential apprentices were interviewed. Apprentices are provided mileage, food and lodging expenses while under the direction of the shearing mentor. Preference on selection of apprentices was given to individuals who plan to pursue shearing full time or at least as a part-time career in Kentucky. Doug Rathke, a professional shearer and Australian certified shearing instructor from Minnesota, was selected to be the mentor. Taylor Schwartz from Mayslick, KY and Micah Wiles from Somerset, KY were chosen as apprentices.

Doug Rathke is recognized both nationally and internationally for his shearing skills as he has represented the USA Shearing Team for the Golden Shears World Sheep Shearing Championships in 1996, 1998, 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2010. In 2019 Doug represented the USA at the World Blade Shearing Championships held in Le Dorat, France. More information about Doug is found at www.lambshoppe.com.

His advanced shearing schools are for intermediate and advanced shearers that need additional skills, techniques, and guidance to improve their speed and efficiency of shearing.

Over the course of training, the apprentice shearers have learned how to improve their shearing time by properly positioning the sheep, understanding the importance of shearer footwork, and reducing the number of shearing strokes used per animal. The apprentices have received detailed instruction on sharpening combs and cutters with advice on the correct selection of tools for varying sheep and shearing conditions. Each apprentice has been taught different exercises and stretches that help prepare them physically for each shearing. Rathke's mentoring stresses that a professional shearer's career longevity and financial success depends on their knowledge of how to take care for their tools as well as their physical and mental body.

The apprentices are quite different in background. Micah has never owned sheep, and still doesn't. On his application he said, "...after attending the shearing school at UK last April...I have sheared over 500 sheep." So in a year he sheared more than I have since graduating from shearing school 40 years ago. He went on to explain,

“ I am particularly interested in learning different techniques for shearing dense wool breeds such as Merino and Rambouillet as I have had requests to shear these breeds, but don’t feel prepared to shear larger flocks.” The selection committee was impressed with this kind of moxie! Taylor on the other hand has experience raising and working with sheep. He attended the UK shearing school when he was in high school and later worked as student laborer at the UK Sheep Unit. He also did a stint as a farm manager for Premier Supplies. Though Taylor has a lot of experience with sheep and shearing, he told me, “Just a couple days with Doug tweaking my work has made a huge difference in my shearing.”

The apprentices traveled to Hebron, Ohio last July to attend the Intermediate and Advanced Ohio Sheep Shearing School. After two days with mentor Doug Rathke stopping them in mid-stroke and repositioning their hands, feet and legs, they probably got the idea that he wasn’t going easy on them. But, when they returned back to KY they emailed to say that it was a “great experience” and what is next? Advanced shearing school on the feeder lambs here at Final Frontier Farm and at Last Move Farm was their second round of shearing education. Doug flew to KY and for two days fine-tuned our apprentices. Advanced shearers, Alex and Madeline Rosenberg also attended along with a group of beginners from Pulaski County FFA. Hopefully, we will see some of those beginning students back in class at the UK Shearing School. With the remaining funds, the final mentor/apprentice encounter will more than likely take place after Taylor and Micah catch up on 2020 spring shearing.

As mentioned before, there were two phases to the Kentucky Shearing and Apprenticeship Project. The second phase has begun with the training of the apprentices by the mentor and soon will be followed by an evaluation of the project. Thus far, comments from



VISIT
www.kysheepandgoat.org
for a list of sheep shearers.

wool producers have been positive. Two calls to a couple long-time friends in the business, one hired Micah and one Taylor, had *exactly* the same response when I asked about the new shearer and shearing day experience. Their response, “Thank you for recommending this great young man. I thought after all these years of having wool sheep I would have to sell them because I couldn’t get a shearer and I can’t shear them myself you know!”

I do know!

Go to the KY Sheep and Goat Development Office website, www.kysheepandgoat.org, for contact information on Taylor Schwartz and Micah Wiles.

Kathy Meyer is a board member of KSWPA, has been a shepherd for 40 years, raises cattle and sheep at Final Frontier Farm, and has a newly established business called Kentucky Wool Works with her friend Shon Wylie from Last Move Farm. She can be reached at tonym243@bellsouth.net.

The Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-Off Program began

in 2010 and collects \$.50 for every \$100 worth of sheep and goats sold in the Commonwealth. According to Kentucky law, Check-Off funds must be used for the purpose of promoting the increased use and sale of sheep and goats.

TO DATE, CHECK-OFF HAS PROVIDED:

- **\$50,000 in New Farmer Recruitment loans** have been given to 25 new/beginning producers in Kentucky since 2012
- **\$50,000** given for special projects to help producers increase marketing efforts throughout the state since 2012
- **\$10,000** spent in promotion of sheep & goat products in 2018

KY Sheep & Goat Check-Off Sponsors the Try Something Different Tonight marketing campaign

of people who tasted lamb and goat products: **26,000**
 # of people who have learned about products and cooking techniques: **5 million**



To learn more about the Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-off Program visit

www.kysheepandgoat.org/Check_Off.html

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