



National Diploma Animal Production

Livestock Production Part 5

Handout 13

Sheep Farming: What You Need to Know

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Many communal farmers and even rural residents with hopes of land in the future, are thinking of farming with sheep. A lot of things need to be considered before you invest in a sheep farming enterprise.



Evaluating your resources

To run a successful sheep enterprise, you will want to efficiently produce high-quality lamb and wool that can be profitably marketed. The first step is to evaluate the resources you have available. Then you'll need to design a sheep production system that will use those resources most efficiently. The resources that you need to evaluate are:

I. Land: How much land is available and what is its productivity. If all the forage dry matter produced on a hectare of land could be harvested as hay and measured in tons, you would have an estimate of your land's productive capacity. Suppose you have 100-hectare veld pasture, of which 30 ha are low producing pasture and will produce 0.75 t per hectare, 30 ha are average and will produce 1.25 tons per ha and 30 ha are high producing and should produce 2.0 tons per hectare. The total yearly pasture production would be $30 \times 0.75 = 22.5$ t, plus $30 \times 1.25 = 37.5$ t, plus $30 \times 2 = 60$ t. This equals a total estimated hay equivalent of 120 tons of which 65% is utilisable by the sheep during grazing. An average ewe requires 0.75 ton of pasture/year. So, in this example, you should have enough pasture for about 104 ewes ($120\text{t} \times 65\%$ divided by 0.75). I have chosen 100 ha for ease of calculation. This is not necessarily an acceptable size for an economical sheep operation. Remember that in certain areas some of the pasture had to be harvested as forage in the winter. You must be prepared to provide hay for winter feed in the summer rainfall areas.

2. Machinery and Equipment: Do you have the equipment and machinery to harvest hay, cut pastures, etc.? Or can you hire a contractor to do this? Or should you plan on purchasing hay? If you only need about 100 tons of hay, it may be cheaper and easier to buy the hay than to make it. What about sheep equipment? You will need proper fences, sorting pens, lambing pens, etc. You will also need equipment for tail docking, castrating, ear tagging and possibly for shearing. A building where you can keep all the equipment and sick animals if needed.

3. Markets: How will you market your products? Are you planning to sell feeder lambs, slaughter lambs, breeding stock, wool or all of the above? Are you planning to sell on a seasonal basis or have a more even cash flow with the lambs for sale throughout the year? Your market is a valuable resource that must be studied.

4. Labour: Do you have the time to properly care for the sheep? Sheep probably respond more to proper care and attention than any other farm animal. For the most part, the labour is not hard, but they require quality time and labour. You must have time to do the jobs when required and not put them off until next week or next month. You must have time to observe the animals and recognize their requirements.

5. Capital: Do you have the capital or money available to get started, hold you until the sheep are in full production and may be see you through some dips or drought? You need to carefully evaluate your financial resources before starting a farming enterprise. Compare sheep farming with other alternatives.

6. Attitude: What is your attitude towards sheep farming? Do you like them? Would you be willing to brave cold rains to feed and care for them? Would you be willing to miss a social event to be sure the sheep were protected from marauding dogs? If you do not have a positive attitude, do not read any further.

Establishing Production Goals and Management Systems

Once you evaluate your resources, you can set-up an overall management system that will use them efficiently and be profitable. Sheep are amazingly adaptable. Using different breeds and systems, you can set and meet your production goals. The goals you set will depend on your resources, abilities, the ability of the sheep and the products you hope to produce.

Product choices:

1. Lamb for meat; Sell feeder lambs at 25-30 kg or keep and feed to 40-45 kg live weight. Market your lambs at Easter or other celebration times.

2. Breeding stock; both registered and/or commercial.

- Wool; probably sold during a wool marketing agent or develop a speciality market for spinning or felting.
- 3. Milk; Sheep's milk for cheese is popular in some areas of the world, but milk breeds aren't readily available in South Africa. However, interest is increasing.
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The level of production, especially of lamb, can vary from less than one lamb per ewe per year to more than two lambs per ewe per year. Choosing the product to be produced and a production goal depends on the breed of sheep and your management system. Each breed represents a given genotype that is best in some situations and not in others. For example, if you want to produce only fine wool, Merino might be the breed of choice.

A production system may use a combination of breeds to meet specific goals. Of course, your success will ultimately depend on good management, nutrition, technology, disease control and marketing. The management system you choose have to make maximum use of the natural pasture growth. For example, in the summer rainfall area, lamb in May if you have maize crop residues available and market lambs in November / December. In this example without any crop residues it is better to lamb in the spring when green veld pasture is available.

Any successful sheep producer keeps up with day-to-day management tasks, and does them properly. Can you assist a ewe before and after lambing if needed or recognize more serious problems?

- Docking: How do you remove a tail from a young lamb?
- Vaccination: Can you recognize the important diseases? Do you have a vaccination schedule?
- Weaning: Do you know about the weaning process?
- Ram care: Can you care for rams even during the non-breeding season?
- Internal and external parasite control: Every sheep has parasites. Can you set up an effective control program?

Markets for Lamb and Wool

Most wool is marketed through one of the wool marketing agents, although some is sold to other buyers or, hand-spinners, and very small quantities are custom made into yarn, cloth or blankets.

Lamb markets need further development and require a more consistent supply. Lambs can be marketed through local auctions, to large abattoirs or directly to the consumer.

Where Do You Get Sheep?

If you decide to start a sheep enterprise, where you get your starter flock is critical. It can be difficult to get exactly the breed you want and number you want at a reasonable cost. Some beginning producers simply started with whatever sheep are available and set up a breeding program to create the preferred genotypes by proper ram selection and careful culling. Obtaining the proper sheep is sometimes difficult, but exceedingly important. The desirable sheep characteristics are:

- A long breeding season or a year-round breeding season
- multiple births
- early sexual maturity
- high average daily gains
- desirable meat-type carcasses

Feeding Sheep

Sheep are efficient users of roughage. In fact, they can get a larger portion of their nutrients from pasture and hay than beef cattle. They eat most of the weeds and, with proper pasture management, can significantly boost production of many native pastures over the long term.

The roughage must, at certain times, be supplemented with minerals, proteins and/or grains, or other concentrated feeds to meet nutritional requirements, especially for ewes during late pregnancy or lactation and for rapidly growing lambs. Salt/mineral combinations with the needed trace elements are available. Copper is toxic to sheep at lower concentration than it is for most other livestock. So read labels to be sure copper levels will not harm sheep.

Smaller farms usually use small square bales, although big round bales are common. The big round bales are popular and require little labour if you have the right handling equipment.

A beginning sheep producer must also decide whether harvested forage should be purchased or produced. Farmers who are adding on a sheep enterprise probably already have the production capability needed, but others may be wise to purchase hay. If you start with 50 or fewer ewes, purchasing extra feed if needed seems reasonable. Remember that any investment in equipment must be paid for by the sheep. A small flock cannot cover the costs of large tractors, forage harvesters and other major equipment.

Information

The best information often comes from other sheep farmers in your area who are willing to spend some of their valuable time with you and help you make decisions. Consider volunteering to work with another sheep farmer for a few weeks to learn more about the job.