More Profit with Hair Sheep

Dr. Gerald Fitch, State Extension Sheep Specialist, OSU, Stillwater, OK

Introduction

The sheep industry in the United States is undergoing dramatic changes. These changes began in the mid 1990s with the loss of the Wool Incentive Program, and the huge decrease in wool value. These changes have forced sheep producers to look to alternative ways of increasing profitability either by decreasing costs or increasing lamb production.

Many sheep operations today do not make enough from wool sales to pay for the cost of shearing. Hair Sheep may provide an alternative, both in decreased costs of production and increased lamb production. Hair Sheep breeds are very good foragers, breed year round, and show increased lambing percentages over many of our wool breeds. Hair Sheep also show some resistance to internal parasites and foot rot, two problems that are very important to producers in the southern states. The biggest positive with hair breeds may be their flexibility of production: Being heat tolerant, they can handle the heat and humidity of the Oklahoma summers and still be very productive.

Popular Hair Breeds

There are several breeds of Hair Sheep in the United States. Those that have received the most interest in Oklahoma and surrounding states are the Dorper, St. Croix, and Katahdin. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but all three lamb year-round, are very good foragers, and good mothers with above average milk production. The Dorper has above average lambing percentages, good growth, and carcass quality. The St. Croix has above average lambing percentages, but slightly lower growth and carcass quality. The Katahdin has well above average lambing percentages and average growth and carcass quality.

Our current wool breeds of sheep do not handle the summers in Oklahoma well, which makes lamb production through the summer much more difficult. These hair breeds allow for lamb production in the late spring and through the summer with good results in lamb growth and milk production, and fewer management problems associated with the heat and internal parasites.

Forage Availability

Forage utilization is the key to any sheep enterprise. If forage is available year round, then planning a breeding program becomes simple, and any of the following breeding programs are feasible. If winter forage is not available, but summer grasses are plentiful, then planning your breeding program becomes much more crucial to the success and profitability of your operation. The key to decreasing inputs and expenses is to let sheep be the harvesters of your forage, not cutting, baling and storing of your forage for future use. The key to increasing profitability is to increase lamb production without increasing expenses. Forage quality, quantity, and timing can make that happen. Hair breeds can fit into a late spring breeding program and meet the goals needed to increase profitability.

BREEDING PROGRAMS

Fall Lambing

Any fall lambing operation must have winter forage available to be a profitable enterprise. With winter forage, lambing in October and November provides for marketing of lambs around Easter at the normal peak of lamb prices. Lambing in the fall normally decreases the need for shed lambing as weather conditions are much more favorable. This is not the normal lambing season for sheep as they are short day breeders and there are only a few of the wool breeds (Dorset, Rambouillet and Polypay) that will conceive and do well in a fall lambing operation. All three

About Dr. Gerald Fitch

Dr. Fitch is state Extension sheep specialist and professor in the Animal Science department at OSU. His extension activities focus on sheep nutrition, reproduction, and genetics. His research interests include evaluation of ewe breeds for out of season lambing; synchronization techniques, in season and out of season, and artificial insemination.

For more information contact:
Dr. Gerald Fitch
OSU Ext. Sheep Specialist
OSU Animal Science Dept.
Stillwater, OK 74078
405-744-6065
jfitch@okstate.edu

of the hair breeds discussed will breed out of season and do well in a fall lambing operation.

Spring Lambing

All breeds will lamb in the spring of the year; this is the normal lambing season. While this is the normal lambing season for all breeds, this time of lambing presents some problems in Oklahoma. Winter forage must be available to allow for good milk production in early lactation without excessive feed expense. Inclement weather is always a potential problem increasing the need for adequate lambing barns and facilities. Unless lambs are very fast gainers and lambs are pushed hard through creep feeding and high grain diets, reaching market ready weight by early June is not feasible. Therefore, many of these lambs are either held through the summer or marketed as feeder lambs in the late spring. Because this is the time frame when all breeds are cycling, lambing percentages are 10-20 percent higher than fall lambing, which can offset decreased lamb prices and lower market weights with more lambs produced and marketed.

Late Spring Lambing

April and May lambing is considered late spring lambing. This is also considered the "normal" lambing season with ewes being bred in November and December. This is the breeding schedule that allows hair breeds to excel when compared to the wool breeds. Many operations do not have the availability of winter forage, but our Bermuda grass pastures are an excellent fit for late spring lamb production. Hair breeds are noted for being heat tolerant, and somewhat resistant to internal parasites. These are traits that our wool breeds do not exhibit. Most commercial sheep producers with wool breeds would not even consider late spring lambing as a feasible alternative due to the negatives associated with our Oklahoma summers. Hair Sheep tolerate the summers well and lambs born in April and May can be carried through on summer pastures with decent gains. Depending on feed conditions, lambing percentages, and milk production, these lambs can weigh anywhere from 40-70 pounds or more in October. At that time a producer can market them as feeder lambs, put them in a feedlot until market ready, or if winter pastures are available, they can be pastured through the winter with minimal supplementation and marketed in March and early April as market-ready lambs.

Intensive

There are many intensive management programs throughout the United States. Twice a year lambing, the Star Program, and three lambings in two years, are ones that are most common. An intensive breeding program simply means more than one lamb crop per year, and with that, much more intensive management is needed to make these operations successful. The easiest to explain is three lambings in two years, which in simple terms, refers to lambing every eight months. Lambing every eight months would mean putting the above programs together: Fall lambing, late spring lambing, and then spring lambing. This would provide for three lamb crops in a two-year period. Wool breeds do not work well in an intensive program in the southern states due to the late spring lambing. However, hair breeds work well in all three lambing times, and therefore are a good fit for an intensively managed program.

Summary

Design your sheep operation around forage availability. Hair breeds allow the flexibility to fit any breeding program due to their ability to lamb year round. With decreased wool prices, the lack of wool production of our hair breeds is no longer considered a negative. Hair breeds' increased lambing percentages, milk production and mothering ability are also very positive traits. Hair Sheep best fit into the late spring lambing program due to their heat tolerance and being somewhat resistant to internal parasites. Producers that have year round forage availability with adequate labor available will also see Hair Sheep work well in an intensive breeding program. Hair breeds do have a place in the future of the United States sheep industry, but more research is necessary to determine best fits for Hair Sheep production.