



# What Makes Raising Sheep Profitable?

*Photos by Author*

—Ulf Kintzel

While the wool market has been depressed for many years (with the exception of extra fine wool, which can only be produced in some very dry climates with low humidity like parts of Australia), lamb meat has been the most important driver of profitability in sheep. Lamb, considered to be both a luxury meat as well as an ethnic food, has enjoyed for some time now relatively high prices, a few ups and downs included. So you could think that the more lambs you raise per ewe the more money you get to pocket, right? Let's examine that.

Fertility in U.S. American sheep is the most neglected economic trait—that is what you will read over and over again in leading sheep publications. It is true that the average lambing percentage in the U.S. is low, hovering right around one lamb per ewe, if memory serves me correctly. This is too low in most cases to be profitable. Given this low average level it is indeed absolutely necessary to increase the lambing percentage, to increase and in some cases even reach profitability. However, the suggestions I hear are going towards the other extreme, seemingly wanting to overcompensate for the low lambing percentage. Most notably, the introduction of Finnsheep is being suggested, most often by government agencies and entities, since Finnsheep are extraordinarily fertile and have often not just twins but also triplets and quadruplets or even more lambs per litter. Whether it is due to Finnsheep or other influences, litters larger than two lambs, and in many cases even two lambs if raised by a young mother, require very high input in order to ensure not only survival but also adequate growth of these lambs without letting the ewe fall apart due to a lack of nutrition. Where is that input coming from? One

word: grain.

Having many lambs over the years also takes a heavy toll on the ewe. You might have heard of the occasional ewe that turned 10, 12, or more years old before she died. That makes for a cute story. I hear that story from pet people often. However, reality is such that on average well-producing ewes do not get to live that long. High input can extend their lives a little. How? Same word: grain.

On the surface the suggestion is simple and seemingly logical: introduce high fertility sheep to get more lambs fast, feed these ewes that have more lambs with more grain and you get to raise more lambs per ewe and thus you become more profitable. It seems it is hard to argue with that logic. The logic also sounds all too familiar.

Some of you readers might be dairy folks, who heard from extension agents over and over again to produce more milk. Just get higher-producing cows, feed more grain, make more milk, and...you will find out that you pay all kinds of people who line their pockets with your money but you yourself didn't end up with more money.

Recently, I read a column in a leading sheep publication where the writer mentioned his impressively high lambing percentage of well over 200 percent, his ewes raising in the end more than two lambs each on average. Those sheep were fed grain. I readily concede I cannot get to a number this high. My current lambing percentage is right around 1.8 lambs (or 180 percent) per year for the adult ewe two years and older, while the lambing percentage for the first-time lambers is far lower. I also should mention that the writer lost money on his sheep that year. Granted, lamb prices were lower than usual last year. In my view the bigger problem is the high cost of

feeding grain. It isn't just the high cost of grain alone. Along with grain feeding come machine, feeder, building, labor, and storage costs. I am sure I even left out a few other costs. I, on the other hand, indeed have fewer lambs to sell, but I also have far, far lower costs.

This leads me to discuss income versus profit. I meet people almost daily who don't distinguish between the two; people who in fact think income *is* profit. Well, not so. Income minus costs equals profit. So in a case of high income but likewise high costs you may end up with very little profit, if any. Other low-input farms may have much less income, but due to very low costs may end up with a much higher profit. This figure—the profit figure—is in the end the only figure that will decide whether or not you stay in business, whether or not you are sustainable. Granted, there is more to farming than profit. However, all the other reasons why you farm will go out the window sooner or later if you can't make a profit.

So what *can* make a sheep enterprise sustainable? You may have guessed it: pasturing your sheep and staying away from grain feeding. Besides subsidies of direct or indirect nature, grain prices also depend heavily on the price of fossil fuels. Oil prices have stabilized for now, but on a much higher level than before. Every time there is volatility in oil prices, you will eventually see the prices stabilizing again, but each and every time on a higher level. That means in essence that the days of cheap grain prices are over. While I cannot predict the future and while I have been wrong before, this may be a safe prediction to make. Along with pasturing sheep, or going grass-fed as the official term says, comes somewhat lower production. Daily weight gains are not quite as high, lambing percentages are lower, and productive life expectancy for ewes is not as high. However, in the end there is a greater chance to make a profit, also because the farmer has more control over the costs.

I would also like to address one seemingly disconnected argument that I have frequently heard. The proponents of intensive, fossil-fuel-driven agriculture tend to drift towards the argument that you cannot feed seven or eight billion people without heavy use of fossil fuel. To which my standard reply is: We are able to feed this many and more *today* if we can at least in part stop wasting 40 percent of all food as we currently do world-wide.

While I would like to draw the conclusion that grain feeding will eat into your profit margin and will leave you with little or no profit no matter how many lambs you raise, I would not like to draw the conclusion that grass-fed is a sure recipe for profit. There is more to it in order to make grass-fed work. Besides fertility and discussing how many

lambs a ewe can raise on pasture, there are other traits that are of importance in order to excel when grazing sheep. One of them is resistance to worms, also known as resistance to internal parasites. While this general term is mostly used, it actually means resistance to the Barber Poll worm, the most deadly of all worms affecting sheep. The official line by extension specialists and other officials was for years and decades to have a regular deworming schedule. That has led to resistance to dewormers and their ineffectiveness on many farms. Now they have jumped to another extreme that makes me feel just as uncomfortable. The new line is selecting for resistance and it appears to me the suggestion is to select for it at all costs. Fact of the matter is that selecting for one trait will lead inevitably to a loss of other good traits. Everything is a compromise if you wish to select proper sheep that have many desirable traits. "Compromise" is a word I like to say often. If you don't wish to compromise, "you surely don't want to get married," as former Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson once said. Selecting sheep for reproduction is in that regard just like it: lots of compromise. I suggest



*High twinning rate in adult ewes is important for profitability, but more lambs per ewe are not better.*

a happy medium when it comes to selecting for parasite resistance. ("Happy medium" is another term I like besides "compromise.") I still deworm but have for the most part no regular schedule. While I deworm all ewes before lambing and all lambs at age 6 to 8 weeks, throughout the rest of the year I deworm only the sheep that need it. I usually do this when I run the sheep through the chute for other reasons, i.e. selecting sheep for butchering or sale. If those who are dewormed continue showing signs of worm infestation, I eventually cull them. However, I do

not apply a "do or die" strategy.

Then there are antagonistic genes. In layman's terms it means that one trait goes against another and you cannot have both excel at the same time. Meatiness and milk production are two of those. So are meatiness and fertility. The meatier the sheep, the less milk it produces and the less fertile (meaning giving birth most often to just a single lamb) it is. The opposite is true too. The more fertile the sheep or the more the sheep milks, the less meat it has. Which brings me back to the aforementioned Finnsheep, which are very fertile and are good milkers but produce in my view unacceptable carcasses. So what is the answer when you want all of it? You guessed it, compromise or happy medium. This has to be considered when selecting breeding stock. I myself step into this trap at times when I have a real meaty ewe that I hope will bring me offspring for replacement purposes, only to be disappointed that the milk production to raise her lambs (if she even has two) leaves much to be desired.

Lastly, pasture management and all that goes along with

it, like rotational schedule, frequency of rotation, residual left when grazing a cell, plant species grown in pasture, and all the rest that must be considered when grazing can make or break your sheep operation. I addressed all these issues in other articles and addressing them again would go beyond the scope of this article. Let's just remember that grass-fed does not mean turning sheep loose in the pasture in the spring and collecting them in the fall. 🐑

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