

Tips for the market lamb 4-H project

This article first appeared in Indiana Sheep Tales in 1995, Vol. 11.2.

by Mike Neary
Extension Sheep Specialist
Purdue University

The 4-H lamb projects are well underway, lambs have been chosen and expectations are high. County Fair season will be here before we know it and in many cases, this is the culmination of the 4-H lamb project. The purpose of this short article will be to help the 4-H enrollee get the most out of their lamb project by offering some feeding and management advice.

The most fundamental animal goal for the lamb project is to take an animal from a young age, that is not ready for market, and grow it to a size and carcass composition that is market acceptable. Nutrition, management and health status are crucial variables in the accomplishment of this goal.

Feeding Lambs

Lambs are ruminant animals and have a stomach that is compartmentalized into four distinct regions. The regions are the reticulum, rumen, omasum and abomasum. Associated with the rumen and reticulum are a large microbial population that helps the animal digest feedstuff. When feeding sheep, one is also actually feeding the rumen microflora. This is why it is so important to change feeds and rations for sheep slowly. It takes from 10 to 14 days for the rumen microbial population to adjust to a new diet. Especially, do not drastically increase grain to sheep. Lambs also need at least 10% - 15% fiber in their diet for normal rumen function.

Many types of diets can be successfully fed to lambs. What is important is that lambs get enough of the basic nutrients necessary to grow at the desired rate. The basic nutrients are: water, energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. A weakness in a feeding program for any of these nutrients will result in poor lamb growth potential.

Water is the most essential nutrient and should be available free choice. It should be clean, of normal temperature and accessible. Lack of water will result in decreased feed intake and reduced growth. When hauling lambs to shows and other areas unfamiliar to them, water intake can be a problem.

Energy status of lambs is a function of how much they are eating and what the energy content of the ration is. High energy feedstuffs consist of grains such as: corn, barley, and milo. Feeds moderate in energy include high quality hay, alfalfa pellets or oats. Low energy feeds include poor quality roughages or hays. Lambs should eat about three to four percent of their bodyweight daily in feed for productive gains. This is assuming a ration that has a high level of grains in it. Lambs that need to be held or grown more slowly should eat about two percent of their bodyweight daily. A diet for lambs should be in the range of 72 to 78% total digestible nutrients (TDN) for good gains.

The amount of crude protein required by lambs will vary throughout their growth cycle. Also, the breed, growth potential, and projected finishing weight will influence growth potential and crude protein needs. Lambs at the creep feeding phase need 18 to 20% crude protein, during the growing phase (50 to 90 pounds) they need 16 to 18% crude protein and 80 pounds to finish they need 14 to 16% crude protein.

Mineral needs for lambs can be met by the free choice offering of a high quality sheep mineral. It is important that lambs fed a high concentrate diet have access to a good mineral, primarily for the salt and calcium contained in them. These help prevent urinary calculi. Make sure the mineral is designed for sheep or copper toxicity problems can arise.

There are many types of diets that can be fed successfully to lambs. Complete diets prepared by a number of feed companies are usually nutritionally complete and of a high quality. Also, home mixed grain rations with corn, oats, protein supplement (commercial or soybean meal), barley, etc. can be balanced for the lambs' needs.

Health and Management

Lambs should be shorn once after selection, and of course before they are shown. This shearing will keep them cooler, with an increased appetite and usually result in faster gains. They will also stay cleaner and are easier to evaluate in regard to growth, fat cover, etc.

Lambs should have access to shade and be treated at least once for internal parasites. Flies should be controlled as much as practical around their housing area.

Lambs also should be vaccinated for clostridial diseases (overeating, tetanus), and possibly soremouth.

It is important that 4-H members check with a veterinarian and read labels on all chemical products, medications, wormers and vaccines for proper usage and withdrawal periods. The withdrawal times are especially important the closer one gets to the show.

Lambs should be weighed and evaluated at least every two weeks. The lambs' feed can be adjusted up or down depending on the results of this evaluation.

If you have questions, feel free to ask for help. Most people like to see 4-Hers have a successful project. Older 4-H members, sheep producers, County Extension personnel, and State Specialists are a good source of information. There are many good sheep magazines, publications and even the internet with good information on sheep. Most of all, have fun!