

#12 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 29, 2007

Raising sheep: Good idea or baaaaad?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—What has 7.73 million heads and bleats? At the end of WW II, America counted about 56 million sheep, raised predominately for wool. After a long decline, our 50-state flock seems to have stabilized at about seven million. Sheep now account for less than one percent of total U.S. livestock receipts, at about \$568 million in 2005. We produced about 37.2 million pounds of greasy wool that year, with each fleece weighing about 7.5 pounds. This ungraded wool currently sells for about \$.25 per pound.

Americans eat about one pound of lamb/mutton per capita annually. Of our 65,000 sheep farms and ranches, the bigger spreads own 80 percent of the sheep. Some 47 percent of all sheep and lambs were found on operations of 500 head or more as of January, 2007, according the USDA's National Agriculture Statistical Service. Middle-size producers are declining, while growth in number is found in both the smallest farms (between 1-99 head), which account for almost 91 percent of all sheep operations, and the largest, with more than 500 head.

The growth in small sheep farms tracks a general trend. Of America's roughly 2 million farms, about 54 percent are classified as either retirement farms (14 percent) or residential/lifestyle (40 percent), according to USDA data analyzed by Ross Korves, Deputy Chief Economist at the American Farm Bureau Federation in 2006. Most of these are considered non-business hobby farms. Each generates a few thousand dollars in net annual farm income while off-farm income makes up more than 90 percent of each household's total. (See www.hobbyfarms.com for "Hobby Farms Magazine.")

Today, only an estimated 1.3 percent of the value of wool and lamb production comes from government payments, according to Keithly Jones, an economist with the USDA's Economic Research Service. Prior to the 2002 farm bill, about 17 percent of sheep receipts were coming from Washington. The 2007 farm bill is stuck in the Washington feedlot.

What explains the growth in the number of small sheep farms?

Lifestyle appears to be one answer. Boomers moving to the country—even a little country—can run a couple of sheep and feel part of the agricultural community. A couple of ewes—pronounced "yos" in my community—farm up a place without the hand-wringing associated with veal calves or the life-saving ads that sometimes spring from literary spiders in cahoots with pigs.

Scale appears to be a second reason. Sheep are easier to handle and less dangerous than cattle. They don't require big, expensive facilities or even high quality forage.

Third, they lend themselves to cottage production of cheese, wool, sheepskins and direct farm-to-customer marketing of meat and other products.

Fourth, sheep are a good first livestock for hobby farmers. Lots of how-to books are available (www.sheepbooks.com). A run-of-the-flock ewe should cost less than \$50. Registered stock and the more exotic of our 40 breeds are much higher. All sheep do pretty much the same thing in the same way. Differences among the breeds have to do with looks, wool quality and productivity, meatiness, twinning potential and suitability to particular climates.

Fifth, sheep soon involve other animals, such as Border Collies who speak only Scottish and eat only haggis, which explains much of their contempt for those they herd.

Finally, sheep require shepherds. Who among us would not want to be leader of the flock? Shepherding, novices should be warned, has been known to raise complicated ethical dilemmas among those with degrees in the liberal arts. Shepherds need to know things about sheep and how to do things to sheep.

Here are some getting-started basics:

Motives. Develop a clear set of reasons for getting into sheep. Try to avoid too many reasons like, "Lambie-pies are cute, and I like to watch them boing-boing around."

Objectives. These can range from having a couple of lawn mowers to making a living raising sheep. Hobby farming—for milk, cheese, wool or meat—is growing, but reasons exist to organize any such activity as a profit-oriented farm business. (American Sheep Industry Association at www.sheepusa.org and www.hobbyfarmsheep.com.) The more sheep you want to raise and the more you want to do with their products, the more time and money you will need to invest.

Space and grub. Acreage needed will depend on the quality of your land and the number of sheep. Ask the county extension agent for his opinion. Be conservative and start out with 25 percent more land than seems to be needed for the projected number of sheep. Overstocking results in environmental issues and health problems in

your flock. While sheep eat weeds and survive arid conditions, they'll do better on good, clean pasture with clean water. Rotational grazing helps to control internal parasites, usually referred to as "worms."

Facilities. Pasture needs to be adequately fenced. Shelter should be provided to protect against severe weather. If lambing is anticipated, a fairly warm, dry, clean place is needed. A couple of pens, loading chute and shearing shed are next in line.

Health care. Sheep are susceptible to many afflictions. Preventive measures—cleanliness, vaccines, wormer, vitamins, close observation and preemptive actions--minimize problems. If you don't think you're up for docking tails and emasculating ram lambs, consider pasturing a mixed flock of gazing balls and bird baths.

Zoonosis. This is a disease that sheep can pass to people, usually through their manure. Pregnant women should not involve themselves in lambing, because organisms that cause miscarriage in sheep do the same in us. Ringworm is a fungus that causes a rash in humans, and soremouth is a viral skin disease that produces sores on hands.

Lambing. Lambs are cute; lambing often isn't. Birth usually happens on sub-zero nights between 2 and 3 a.m. It may require a very small helping hand. Sooner or later you will end up bottle feeding orphans and the unwanted.

Fate. Most lambs end their short lives as meat. If you think this is unfair or unethical, revisit the idea of raising lawn ornaments. Most sheep end up as mutton, a food that may have prompted independence rebellions throughout the British Empire. While mutton has its advocates, leg of old yo is not regularly featured on Martha.

Security. If you pasture sheep, you are likely to need a 24/7 thug out in the field to discourage coyotes, dogs and bears. Most farms use big dogs, donkeys or llamas, though a semi-violent inmate on work release could do in a pinch.

Tax implications. If you set yourself up as a profit-oriented sheep business, you are eligible for the tax opportunities afforded other farm businesses. Many Boomers with high salaries have discovered their inner shepherd while having the tax code explained to them.

Domestic sheep are pretty, appealing, useful, defenseless creatures. They'll give you the coat off their backs. Many think they're dumb. But I ask you: how many other animals have been smart enough to turn otherwise sensible people with high SAT scores into devoted caregivers?

Curtis Seltzer, land consultant, is the author of How To Be A DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com. He holds a Class A residential contractor's license in Virginia and has lived in a now 90-year-old farmhouse for 25 years.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com