

Market Lamb Essentials

Overview. Approximately 8,000 lambs will be involved in the 4-H market lamb project annually. Many hours over several months will be devoted to the proper selection, care, feeding, and management of a potentially award-winning lamb. The 4-H lamb project is another tool used in youth development. The basic information and resources needed to support market lamb projects are as follows.

Questions To Ask. To adequately address the needs of the 4-H family interested in exhibiting market lambs, the following questions may need to be asked:

- * What are the goals of the 4-H member and family?
- * What shows or time of the year will you exhibit the project(s)?
- * Will you need assistance in locating and selecting your project?

Selection.

Classification. The four major breed classes of market lambs in Texas are: finewools (Rambouillet, Delaine-Merino, Debouillet); finewool crosses (first cross between a finewool and a medium wool, usually a Suffolk or Hampshire); medium wools (predominately Suffolk, Hampshire, and crosses among them); and Southdown. A fifth breed class, hair sheep, has been added to the Fort Worth Livestock Show and the State Fair of Texas for 2008. The other exception is Odessa which only shows finewools. Market lambs are classified by a three-person committee. Agents should become familiar with the Market Lamb Classification Standards, which were revised in 2007 and are printed in all major livestock show catalogs. Show lamb classification relies on both the genetic makeup and the physical characteristics of the lamb such as color markings, physical structure, skeletal shape, and feel (softness) of the pelt. When selecting a lamb, you should be confident the lamb will classify.

Age of Lamb, Fall Born vs. Spring Born. Finewool and finewool-cross lambs for summer and fall shows are generally born October to December (fall born) while lambs for winter and spring shows are generally born February to April (spring born). Most medium wool and Southdown lambs are born in the spring, however, some are born in January, are more mature, and are preferred for summer and fall shows. Spring born lambs can also work for summer and fall shows, but some may not reach the minimum weight required or have the maturity needed to be competitive. Some shows (Dallas, Odessa, Fort Worth, and San Antonio) require lambs to have their baby/milk teeth at show time. Lambs will normally lose their baby teeth at 12 to 14 months of age. All shows have minimum weight limits and most have maximum limits. Agents should become familiar with age and weight limit requirements.

Quality Considerations. Other selection criteria include muscle, structural correctness, style and balance, and growth potential. When selecting lambs, be aware of wool length and fatness. If possible, select lambs after shearing. Young lambs that are bloomy and fat always look good while thin lambs do not. Learn to look past fat and recognize muscle.

Where to Purchase Lambs. Lambs may be purchased by private treaty or through sales. As a general rule fall born lambs are sold in March and April and spring born lambs are sold in May through August. Information on various breeders and lamb sales is available through magazines such as "The Showbox" and "The Purple Circle."

Health Papers. Some major shows may require market lambs to have health papers upon entering the show grounds, therefore, check major show catalogues to determine requirements.

Validation. Lambs must be state validated in the month of June for the State Fair of Texas and in the month of October for the major winter shows (Odessa, Fort Worth, San Antonio, San Angelo, Houston, and Austin). Most county shows also require lambs to be state validated. Tags for the State Fair of Texas are ordered the last of April and tags for the major winter shows are ordered the first of September through Dr. Frank Craddock in San Angelo. San Angelo Stock Show became a Texas Lamb Breeders Association show for 2009 and will show finewools, finewool crosses, medium wools, and Southdowns. All lambs exhibited at the San Angelo Stock Show must have been bred and born in Texas and have Texas Lamb Breeders Association (TLBA) tags recorded on their validation forms.

Facilities and Equipment. Facilities need not be elaborate. The barn should have at least 20 square feet of space per lamb, be well ventilated, well drained, and open to the south and/or east. Lambs should be kept cool during summer and warm during winter. Fence height should be at least 42 inches to discourage jumping and made of a material that will keep predators out. Portable feeders should be hung at the same height as the top of the shoulder of lambs being fed and cleaned daily. Individual feeding stalls are an excellent way to measure feed consumption. Fresh water is the most important ingredient in feeding lambs. Water troughs should be small so they can be drained and cleaned daily. Other equipment needs may include a stiff brush, shovel, trimming table, electric clippers with proper combs and cutters, small wool card, syringes and needles, blankets and/or socks, rope halters, hoof trimmers, hand shearers, drench gun, small portable feed trough, water bucket, show box, hot air blower, portable livestock scale, extension cord, muzzles, and electric fan.

Nutrition, Management and Exercise. There are no magic feeds or rations that make champions. It is the total feeding program, including the feeding schedule, the exercise program, and the careful observation during the growing and finishing stages that makes a champion. The five basic nutrients are water, protein, carbohydrates and fats (energy), minerals and vitamins. Agents should recommend a balanced commercially prepared ration with a crude protein range of 14 to 17 percent. Do not constantly change rations and never make abrupt changes in the amount of feed being fed at each feeding. Lambs should consume two to three percent of their body weight per day. Weigh lambs on a regular basis. Feeding and exercise go hand-in-hand. Exercise is an excellent way to condition and tone your lambs and help control excess fat deposition. Lambs should be exercised extremely hard and fast for short distances of 300 to 400 yards. Exercise programs should begin two to three months before the show, depending on the ration fed and the condition of the lambs. An exercise track and a trained dog is considered the best method, but other methods such as the use of four-wheelers is beneficial. Recommended track dimensions and additional information is available in the 4-H Club Lamb Guide.

Health. The key to a healthy lamb is the development of a preventative health program. It is a good practice to assume that newly acquired lambs have had no treatments. The two major problems in lambs are enterotoxemia (overeating disease) and internal parasites. For enterotoxemia, give one shot followed three weeks later by a booster shot. For internal parasites, drench lambs upon arrival followed by another drenching three weeks later. Regular hoof trimming is also necessary. Agents and exhibitors should utilize a local veterinarian to diagnose and treat diseases and develop a preventative health program. State and federal laws and regulations concerning the use of drugs for livestock are established to protect human and animal health. When administering drugs, always follow label instructions, including the withdrawal time before slaughter. The use of a drug in a manner other than stated on its label is regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and may be done only under the control of a licensed veterinarian. Most Texas livestock shows have strict policies against the illegal use of drugs and will disqualify animals if such drugs have been used.

Fitting and Showing. Fitting lambs for show requires more than simply shearing them. Lambs may be rough shorn several times during the feeding period to help monitor fatness. Lambs, regardless of breed, should be washed prior to shearing for show. Wash and shear lambs as close to show day as possible. Most of the major shows do not allow shearing and washing on the show grounds. A blow dryer may be used to hasten drying time. Shearing can be done while the wool is still damp. Lambs should be sheared smooth. Wool below the knees and hocks should not be shorn. This "boot" can be carded out and blended with hand shearers or electric clippers. Small animal clippers may be used to clip closely around the eyes, ears, and delicate areas. Immediately after shearing, cover each lamb with a blanket. A clean, well-bedded pen should be provided to keep lambs clean and dry. Lambs must be halter broken and taught how to lead, how to set their legs, and how to brace before the show. Showmanship clinics should be conducted to teach proper showmanship techniques.

Rules. The Exhibitors' Handbook contains the rules for a particular show. Each show is different and the rules change from year to year. Each year, take the time to review the rules of each show and keep a copy of the rules on hand while at the show. Ignorance of the rules is not a valid excuse for breaking them. One key section in all Exhibitors' Handbooks is the "Animal Health Regulations." Most major livestock shows (and some county

shows) require a current set of health papers on an animal before entry onto the show grounds. Review the health requirements outlined in the Exhibitors' Handbook at least a month before the show because some tests required by the Texas Animal Health Commission take a week or more to perform.

Other Information.

Agent Responsibilities: Project visits and management, validation, knowledge of entry deadlines (August 25 for State Fair of Texas, December 1 for all other shows), manage entries to major shows,

Contacts: Other agents, specialists, MENTOR volunteers, breeders.

References: 4-H Show Lamb Guide by Frank Craddock and Ross Stultz, AS 3-4.059.
Sheep Production Handbook by the American Sheep Industry Association.