

Wool you be mine?

Recently we finished shearing the Extension Learning Farm flock with the help of Mary Lake, Robbie-Jo Hall and Sandy VonAllmen. Lots of little school kids touring the farm got to see a sheep being sheared and all the ewes and lambs together in the barn. We also had the welcome help of some volunteers and work study students. Shearing can be a lot of work. It's more fun if you have lots of help but there is a cost in time and money.

It costs me \$5.00 per head to shear each sheep and I get 5 pounds of wool off of each of our commercial Dorset type sheep. Prices over the last ten years have been as low as 35 cents and as high as \$1.35 per pound. We have to get at least \$1.00 per pound just to pay the shearer. That doesn't even count trucking the wool to the pool or my time setting up the day before, and the days spent shearing, skirting and packing wool or the anxiety of trying to keep the sheep dry when it rains every day. I admit that I love my home flock of hair sheep!

Hair sheep are one alternative to shearing. Katahdins, Dorpers, Barbados and St. Croix are the most common hair sheep. They have hair that gets thicker in the winter and sheds out in the spring and early summer. Some almost have woolly hair in the winter. The cold winter does not seem to bother them any more than the wool sheep. Hair sheep are increasing in popularity because they don't need shearing or tail docking. Traditional buyers are becoming more accepting of the hair sheep, at least in the Eastern markets. Twenty years ago the hair sheep got put into the goat pens at the sale barns!

Because the hair sheep are a recent addition to the market, there hasn't been as much selection for carcass quality. It has improved dramatically over the last 20 years but has a ways to go to match up to a nice Dorset or Suffolk carcass. The Katahdin breeders are very serious about doing a good job and selecting for economic traits (visit www.katahdins.org). Hair sheep are often associated with grass fed operations or forage feeding because of their resistance to internal parasites. They perform well in a feeding situation as well but will get quite fat if over fed. They are on the small side at maturity so lambs in the 70-90 pound size are ready for marketing, making them a good fit with eastern ethnic markets such as New Holland.

Wool sheep come in two styles. One is primarily for meat production but produces wool and the other has specialty wool appreciated by fiber artisans. Dorsets, Suffolks, Polypay and Finns are all the first type and sheep like the Icelandic, Cotswold, Shetland, and Merino fall in the other category. Romneys produce a lot of long course, easy to spin wool and fall into both groups.

Wool sheep can stand outside in any weather and hardly notice it. The meaty breeds have been selected for carcass quality and fast growth for many years and have more consistent genetics. They require shearing but you also have wool to sell for income. The question is whether the income from the wool will cover the cost of shearing, especially if you have to pay for some extra labor to help during shearing. White fleeces of good quality are definitely worth more on the wool commodity market so colored sheep are mostly a novelty on commercial farms.

Specialty wool sheep are more likely to be colored and cater more to the hand spinner/felter market. It takes a savvy marketer to sell specialty fleeces but with the advent of the internet it is easier to reach out to people looking for fleeces. It is a relatively small niche market. Some farmers take the approach

of processing their wool and do a good job dyeing, spinning, weaving and making their wool very appealing (visit www.nywhitestonefarm.com). Wool sheep sometimes wear coats to protect the fleece as bedding and feed in the fleece decrease the value. Wool sheep grow so much wool that they can be sheared twice in one year. Having all different colored sheep can be fun and interesting especially for a family hobby flock.

One word of caution....if you want to switch over to hair sheep, it would be best to purchase some hair sheep and a ram. If you attempt the transition by using a hair ram on your wool ewe flock it takes at least two generations to get a hair coat. During the transition you will have to shear the half wool/half hair sheep and the shearer will hate you. Hair/wool mixes are a bear to shear and hard on the equipment due to the texture of the wool interspersed with hair.

While I love my hair sheep I hope there continues to be farmers willing to raise good quality wool sheep because I love to wear wool and places like Alcoa rely on wool uniform that are flame resistant and long wearing. Wool is both an industrial and luxurious fiber with a long history.