

## HOW WILL WE WESTERN PRODUCERS RESPOND?

by James Powell<sup>1</sup>

You have to be optimistic to run sheep on the hills of Texas, with rocks, brush and snakes, or on the desert flats of the west, with grease wood and blackbrush, where grass never grew or ever will grow.

We watch sheep from day to day grazing to make a living. Sometimes we wonder how in the world they do it with only a little bit of supplemental feed. You've got to be an eternal optimist to be in this business.

And then October comes--the counties and school districts render their taxes. And later the federal government renders its tax. You look out over the country and wonder how you're going to get along. Well, it works out, one way or another.

I'd defy most people who haven't seen some of our hill country to look at it and give us a solution to the problem, or to go out west, where the number of sheep permitted on the mountain range is being cut, and give a solution to the problem out there. But I think there is a way. In fact, I'm very optimistic. As long as the government continues to govern rather than rule we'll be happy. We'll be able to find the financing, the way and the time--we'll be able to pay the taxes that are required and still make a living in the sheep business. This is the way we might do it.

You've heard of the consumer-preferred carcass. The National Wool Growers Association and American Sheep Producers Council are working together to find out what kind of a person the lamb consumer is, and what kind of a lamb the packer will buy and the retailer will sell. They have come up with the criteria for the consumer-preferred lamb carcass. It is evident that we must satisfy the housewife and sell lamb meat to her, for she seems to be our only market. We'll probably find that a live lamb weighing from 95 to 105 pounds will be ideal. More than likely when the carcass goes into the case to be sold it will grade USDA choice or perhaps low choice. The loin will more than likely be in the neighborhood of 2 1/2 to 3 square inches per 50 pound carcass. The leg will be wide, deep and heavily muscled, and this lamb should yield in the neighborhood of 49 to 51 percent. The percentage of preferred trimmed cuts should be about 70 percent of the carcass weight, and the fat covering should be in the neighborhood of .2 to .3 of an inch.

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How can we find out how the live lamb looks to the producer? How are we going to select for it? In our area and in the western states conferences are held every summer to evaluate lambs for carcass retail cut-out value.

Producers, feeders, 4-H club and FFA leaders, packers, retailers and others come to the conference and see the lamb on the hoof. They are encouraged to grade the live lamb and estimate how it will cut out. The preferred lamb carcass is the one which will cut out the greatest retail value in dollars.

At one of the first of these evaluation conferences there was a difference of about \$8 between the carcass value of the first and last ranked lambs, although the top lamb graded low choice and the last graded low prime.

The top lamb had a fat cover at the 12th rib of .13 inches of fat, 72 percent of the carcass weight in the trimmed preferred cuts and a loin eye area of 2.8 sq. in. Thus you can see that this top ranked lamb exceeded the consumer preferred carcass specifications that the National Wool Growers Association has recommended.

Eventually the retailer will go into the packers' coolers and select the lambs that cut out the greatest number of dollars for him. Some already are doing this. There needs to be some method by which the packer or the lamb buyer can go into the country and buy lamb from the producer at a value commensurate with the type of lamb carcass being sold. If the lamb producer or feeder is providing a consumer-preferred carcass, he should receive true value for it, or he should receive the top price. Of course we must be willing to accept a lower price for lambs which do not cut out so well. It is going to take a long time for the lamb industry to adopt this approach, but I think it will come.

Uniformity of supply of lamb is another major improvement area. In the Southwest many breeders are going to fall lambing, which means that they are trying to take advantage of the eastern markets. If you look at price trends over the past 20 years you'll find that lamb prices have been at a peak from March to the last of May or first of June. Some people are going to fall lambing so they can market their lambs then.

I think this trend is tending to provide a more uniform supply of lambs on the market. It could help solve the problem of seasonal variation in the marketable supply of lamb.

Research work also is under way, and I think results will be forthcoming before too long to solve the causes of death losses and the sickness of feeder lambs going to feed lots in the West and in the Midwest.

Management of the lamb from the time it is weaned to the time it reaches the feed lot in the Midwest is an important factor. A lamb needs to go directly from its mother to full feed in a matter of hours, not in a matter of days. I think that if the lamb is handled this way we will reduce death loss and sickness.

Another point of interest is that in the Southwest a number of producers are putting in their own feed lots. Some producers also are feeding out their lambs in commercial feed lots close to home. Lambs can be taken from the ewe in the morning and put on full feed in the afternoon. They seldom if ever get sick. They go on feed right away and in 45 days are in the market place, probably weighing around 90 pounds. The packers seem to like them, and I think you are going to see more of this.

At the Blue Bonnet experiment station in McGregor scientists are running an experiment on lambing three times in two years. If this idea works it will increase the supply of lambs. Ewes are bred once every eight months. The lambs are taken off the mother in about two months. Milk production from the ewe diminishes after about the sixth week, so that at the end of two months she is giving very little milk. The lamb is able to go on to full feed and continue without any variation in its feeding habits.

Some commercial feeders in our area are getting feed conversions of around 1 to 5 and 1 to 6, or about 1/2 pound a day gain on full feed in dry lot with 3 pounds of feed fed at a feed cost of about 9 cents a day or lower. This is a very interesting development. The commercial people are following this practice and are having good luck with it.

Control of the screw worm has been another big step forward in technology. As you know sterile flies were released, and they breed themselves out of existence. This is a new, effective control measure growing out of research.

We'll have less loss from the screw worm in the future. In past years an 8 percent lamb loss per year was a frequent occurrence. This year we have had only 10 cases in Texas and 25 in the United States, most of these in Arizona. As we prevent losses we'll be able to increase the supply of lambs and perhaps have a more uniform supply available for market.

The mountain state producers are in a little bit more precarious position in terms of increasing their production than we are in the Southwest. The weather situation and the federal government's taking of more range for protected wilderness areas and cutting of grazing allotments will adversely affect the sheep industry in the mountain states, I think. As you know, in the mountain country the federal government and the states own about half of the land.

It would be difficult for us in the western states to produce lambs without taking wool into consideration, or to produce wool without taking lamb into consideration. So what we have done is develop an animal that will produce both the maximum wool and lamb. We realize our sheep must produce the quality of products at competitive costs to compete in the international as well as the domestic market; so we continue to improve our sheep.

Wool is the big item in the western states. Sheep are selected for conformation and for wool. We try to encourage proper shearing, grading, packaging and marketing of wool.

Recently a delivery point for the future's market was established in San Angelo. And along with that came the appraisal system, which very few of us have ever seen. The people who do the appraising will negotiate a contract based on the appraisal. This program gives the producer as well as the warehouseman a basis for knowing more about the kind of a product you have and its true value.

When all of these factors are taken into consideration, you can understand why we in the western states produce a dual-purpose animal selected to yield both lamb and wool at a low cost per animal unit. Thereby, we hope to compete favorably in both the lamb and wool markets. This eliminates the cost of two herds (one for wool and one for lamb) which are raised as a necessity, as I understand it, in Australia and New Zealand, our prime competitors.