**Sheep and Goat Newsletter – March 2014**

Hopefully by the time you get this, the polar vortex will have spun its last spin and the temperatures will be a little more “spring-like”. The ewe flock doesn’t seem to mind the temperatures and are happily munching away on second and third cut baleage. My hair sheep at home do OK in the colder temperatures but they would prefer the temperature above zero and above ten would be even better (me, too!). I wish I had bought stock in the hand-warmer industry last fall because I have used a record number of them this winter!

I am wondering how the cold weather all up and down the east coast has affected farmers who are not used to lambing in the cold this time of year. We at least have barns and lots of stored feeds. Our sheep bred at the AI workshop in September lambed on a cold weekend in February reminding me why it is much easier to lamb when it is warmer! Of course, we planned the workshop for a time when the instructor could do it and when the producers could come without really thinking about when the lambs would be born!

On Valentine’s Day weekend we were blessed with 9 lambs from ewes that were bred artificially through laparoscopic AI (LAI) with frozen semen or through vaginal AI (VAI) with fresh extended semen. We started with a single ram lamb born on Valentine’s Day. His father is a ram from New Zealand. Here is his description:

Aorere 218 may be the most outstanding production Poll Dorset ram to be imported into the USA. He was born a twin, in fact his dam has produced 9 lambs in 4 lambings. His 87 day weaning weight was 94.6 lbs, raised on an all grass system. At 7.5 months he weighed 182.6 lbs and had not been fed any grain. His loin eye measured 5.04 sq. in. with 4.0 mm back fat. 218 was ranked number one for loin eye area and had 15% more muscle than the average ram lamb at Aorere. Under Lambplan, 218 has a positive EBV for all traits measured. His index is 140.7% based on 60% for weight gain, 20% for muscling and 20% on back fat. (check out 218 at the SuperSires ltd website www.toprams.com)

The next day we had 8 more lambs born right in the order they were inseminated. We have a nice set of twins and a set of triplets (4 rams and a ewe) out of an Australian ram called Ivadene 154/99 Benchmark. His description follows:

Benchmark is the leading sire on the cross-flock evaluation in Australia. He’s a real production type Dorset that is correct, well-balanced, showing great length, neck extension, clean points and tremendous carcass attributes. Benchmark’s dam is ranked number one in the Ivadene flock for lamb production. (search for Ivadene Polled Dorset on line and see Benchmark)

Later in the day we had a single and a set of twins born that were actually sired by our Dorset ram but through fresh semen AI. I know that sounds like a waste of time but we were learning to collect semen and that was the ram that would cooperate and provide some semen. We wanted to try the process.

We had two other ewes that were inseminated by LAI that did not conceive. Six out of eight is not too bad especially considering we were in a classroom setting that is not the most conducive to being quick and exact.

Of course the weather was very cold and the last set of twins was born at 11 pm so we had a late night getting them dry and nursed before we left. The next day I put “sweaters” on all the lambs because the temp was -17 and the last thing I wanted to happen was to lose one of these lambs. The extra time involved and cold weather anxiety just reinforced why we don’t normally lamb in the cold weather!

They are nice chunky lambs. I can tell they are a little bigger than normal because my usual lamb vests were a little snug! They are all doing well now and running around having a lamb rodeo in the barn. They like to sneak into the next pen with their older siblings (fall lambs) and try to pick a fight and then run away.

If you have been marketing lambs lately you have noticed that the prices at the terminal market in New Holland are very good. The last group of lambs we sent were in the $2.40-2.80/lb live weight range. With prices that good, the marketing costs (trucking/commission, shrink) are a little easier to absorb. At that price it is hard to sell them as freezer lambs because a live lamb at 80 pounds starts out costing $200 plus processing ($245.00) for 28 pounds of meat or $8.75 a lb before you add any costs like transport. When the price is low in New Holland then it makes more sense to market retail cuts or freezer lamb because you can control the price and receive more than the auction.

Will the price stay this high? Probably not because there are less lambs available in the spring than there are in the fall. Lamb numbers are down in general so even last fall we were getting something better than the year before. However, there are many more lambs available in the fall in general so I would expect auction prices to be back below $2.00/lb for good lambs next fall.

There are a couple of interesting things going on. Hair sheep are bringing prices as good as the traditional woolies. In the past, hair sheep have ended up in the goat pen! Perhaps the hair sheep producers are doing a better job or the buyers are getting used to them. They sure taste good! Another odd thing is that the lambs listed in the second category down from the top grade are getting better prices than the higher grade. Don’t know why this is and haven’t been able to get a good explanation. For those of you that forgot how to check the prices, go to [www.sheep.cornell.edu](http://www.sheep.cornell.edu) and click on Monday New Holland prices over on the left hand side near the bottom.

A couple strategies for marketing at the auction are to make sure your animals are big enough. A lamb that is less than 50 pounds will be even smaller after the trip, even if it is to a local auction. Hold back lambs that are small or look like they need more feed. Send the best stuff and keep the rest for the next load. In some cases, it makes sense to send those small ones because you will have to put more inputs into them to get them up to size but then you have to be happy with less dollars per pound. Splitting up your lamb marketing also divides your risk over several different sale days. If you can hold lambs until January, the prices are usually higher. Doing this means keeping them on stored feeds longer and more chore labor during the colder weather but if you can do it easily in your set-up then that is one way to go.

Speaking of marketing strategies…the Northern Adirondack Lamb Cooperative (NALC) is still meeting about once a month to work on marketing together. The group started selling live lambs together, then added retail cuts at the farmer’s market and carcasses to grocery stores. The processsing, inventory and storage challenges of marketing cuts and the delivery challenge of marketing carcasses can be daunting. The group has now gone back to doing some of those things individually and helping each other with inventory and labor when they can and then marketing groups of live lambs together as NALC. At the moment there is no official cooperative status but instead a bunch of us trying to help each other and keep each other informed.

One idea we are working on is for NALC to take over organizing the trucks to New Holland. The co-op would come up with some protocol for lambs to be NALC lambs. Everyone would still be welcome to send their animals on the truck but those animals that meet the protocols would receive a back tag or some marking that would stay on for the auction. The hope is that the buyers would begin to recognize that those lambs with the NALC mark are consistent and would therefore be willing to pay a little more for them. It is even possible that they would want to order them directly from the group someday. Cost for participating would be minimal since out expenses would be relatively low.

Along those lines, the NALC members have been keeping track of who buys their lambs at New Holland. We are planning to call those buyers and ask them what they are looking for when (size, finish, breed, time of year) and whether they would be interested in buying direct. It will be interesting to see what they say. I am guessing that they like going to New Holland because it is one-stop-shopping for them and they don’t have to deal with individual producers. That’s why the idea of marking lambs that are already going to New Holland might work. We’ll see. I will write about what we find out.

On another note, it would be great to revive the sheep and goat auctions at Empire in Gouverneur. In the past, they cooperated with the Dryden market to sell graded lambs and goats at both places at once. I think the time is ripe to try that again. We received good prices locally when that collaboration was working.

Last but not least, we can’t talk about marketing without mentioning the holidays when lambs and goat are in demand. Here is a list of those coming up. Since they will probably kick me out of the Farm News for writing too much about sheep and goats, I will save the descriptions of Kosher and Hallal and the types of animals for each holiday for next month (Go to [www.sheepgoatmarketing.info](http://www.sheepgoatmarketing.info) and click on “education” if you can’t wait!).

Both Easters = April 20th

Ramadan = Jun 29th to July 29th

Rosh Hashana = September 24-26th

Id al Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) = October 5th

Hindu Holiday for goats = Mid-September

Of course, Christmas, New Years, Cinco de Mayo (May 5), 4th of July, and the Caribbean holidays in August are good for goat marketing as well.