

Sheep Have A Place In Arizona Farming

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There is a profitable place for sheep in Arizona's farming economy — if the farm flock is given reasonably good management. This statement is based on observations at the Yuma Mesa Branch Experiment Station, where sheep have been maintained on irrigated alfalfa pasture for the past five years.

Three breeding practices, using grade Rambouillet ewes, have been compared: (a) grading up, using purebred Rambouillet rams; (b) a rotational crossbreeding program, using mutton ram breeds; and (c) purchase of older bred range ewes to be used for one lamb crop, replacing them with another set of similar ewes in the fall and spring of each year. Due to the difficulty in obtaining bred range ewes, the latter practice has been eliminated.

Rambouillet Stands Heat Best

Sheep with some Rambouillet breeding tolerate high temperatures better than most breeds. The grading-up practice has been maintained primarily as a control flock in this respect. However, to date little difficulty has been encountered by the cross-bred sheep.

The advantage realized in weight and condition of the lambs would warrant the crossbreeding practice. The crossbreeding program has included the use of Lincoln, Suffolk and Rambouillet rams. All crossbred ewe lambs have been returned to the flock. Their performance has been satisfactory.

Ewes can be maintained on alfalfa almost continuously, with little supplemental feed. However, they tend to become over fat when dry, if the alfalfa is lush. It is advisable to place them on a low-quality roughage as soon as their lambs are weaned. Roughages that could be used are low-quality alfalfa hay, alfalfa straw, Bermuda and other straws. The ewes should be returned to the alfalfa pastures for breeding.

At Yuma there are two slack seasons in the growth of alfalfa. These usually occur during August and December. This is not serious, since it is uncommon for ewes to breed earlier than September 15

in hot climates. The lambs are weaned about August 1 and ewes placed in dry lot on low-quality roughage. In December all ewes will have been bred and could be placed in dry lot again.

No Elaborate Equipment

The equipment necessary for maintaining a farm flock is simple. Woven wire fencing, shade and fresh water are necessary. Ewes and lambs will often get pneumonia if permitted on land too soon after irrigation. They should be kept off the pastures two or three days. Such a unit is available for inspection at the Yuma Mesa Station.

The income from a farm flock will depend largely upon the percentage lamb crop and in avoiding excessive losses. Since many ewes have twins, a lamb crop exceeding 100% is not uncommon. At Yuma, during the five years the lamb drop has averaged 112% with 12% loss by weaning time. Weaning weights have averaged 91 pounds with an average grade of choice on the lambs from mutton-type rams.

Lamb Yield Clear Profit

Twenty-five ewes have been maintained per acre. Assuming 100% lamb crop weaned, one acre of alfalfa will yield 2,000 to 2,400 pounds of lamb and 250 to 300 pounds of wool per year, with but little additional feed. The wool should just about pay for the cost of operation with the lamb gains being profit.

Excess pasture is usually available in the spring prior to lambing. If additional feeder lambs can be obtained, gains up to half a pound per head per day can be expected at a rate of 25 lambs per acre.

The above figures are based on well-managed, rotational grazing.

DESPITE the old notion that sheep cannot stand hot summer weather without high mortality, a flock of sheep has been maintained satisfactorily for the past five years at Yuma, where 100-plus temperatures in six months of the year are not unusual.

