

Sheep



History

Sheep have been a part of Saskatchewan's agriculture for more than 200 years, with early settlers bringing breeding stock to harvest the province's vast rangelands.

Production

Sheep are hardy and adaptable to a wide range of conditions and management preferences. The majority of Saskatchewan sheep producers raise market lambs, for meat production. Sheep production is comprised of farm flocks, range flocks, and finishing operations spread throughout the province.

Farm flocks: range in size from 25 to 250 ewes and market lambs that are fed to a finished weight of 110 pounds (the usual target weight for slaughter lamb in Canada).

Range flocks: large flocks of 400 to 1200 ewes are kept in grass pastures and their lambs are weaned off the grass and sold to feedlots.

Finishing flocks: lambs are bought from range flocks and fed in a feedlot until they reach the market weight.

Sheep are very efficient grazing animals but they require careful management if the flock is to stay healthy and productive. Ewes are bred to lamb between January and June. Sheep need to be well fed before and during breeding to ensure a good conception rate and a high incidence of twins and triplets. Besides grass or hay, salt, and good water, ewes need a supplement of grain and minerals. Breeding usually occurs in the fall. Gestation is about 150 days. While most ewes are bred once per year there are some breeds which produce a three-lamb crop over a two-year period.

Wool sheep are shorn once a year usually in the spring. The sheep grows another fleece of wool by the fall when it is needed to keep the animal warm. The average weight of the wool from one mature sheep is about 2.3 kg. Most wool fleeces are collected on farms and marketed through the Canadian Wool Growers' Cooperative. The raw wool is sent to the mills for cleaning, grading, sorting, and processing.

Diet

Sheep are ruminants, which means they have four stomachs. They mainly eat grass, forbs (broad-leaved plants), and other pasture plants. Sheep will graze for an average of seven hours per day, mostly in the hours around dawn and in the late afternoon, near sunset. The amount of pasture that it takes to feed a sheep depends upon the quality of the soil, the amount and distribution of rainfall, and the management of the pasture.

When fresh forage is not available, sheep are usually fed stored and harvested feeds such as hay or crop by-products. Hay is a grass or legume that has been mowed (cut) and cured (dried) for use as livestock feed.



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Grain is often fed to sheep with higher nutritional needs, such as pregnant and lactating ewes. Grain is the seed part of cereal crops such as barley or oats. Sheep also require water, salt, vitamins, and minerals.

Animal Welfare

Sheep farmers care about their animals and know that properly cared for animals are the most productive and profitable. There is a national Code of Practice followed by sheep farmers that ensures the animals are well-treated and kept in a safe and comfortable environment.

Nutrition

Lamb is the meat from young sheep that are less than one year old. Mutton is the meat from a sheep that is over one year of age.

Lamb meat is an excellent source of high quality protein and provides the body with 60% of the daily requirement for protein.

Lamb is an ideal source of iron. The iron found in lamb meat and other red meat is in a form that is easily absorbed by the body. The inclusion of iron in the diet is vital in the formation of red blood cells.

Lamb meat provides 45% of the daily requirement of zinc, essential for growth, healing, and a healthy immune system.

Lamb meat is a great source of B vitamins. It can provide over 100% of the daily requirement of B12 and is a good source of thiamine. Half the fat in lamb meat is unsaturated, which is good for you.

Lamb meat is a good choice for health conscious people as it is relatively low in calories. A three ounce serving of lean lamb, from cuts such as the leg or loin, only contains 176 calories.

Sheep and the Environment

When sheep are properly grazed they benefit the land by aerating the soil with their hooves, which allows more oxygen and water to enter the ground. The hooves also puncture the soil pan and increase the ability of seeds to germinate and grow. Sheep provide the soil with natural fertilizer in the form of manure.

By clearing brush, sheep grazing at low to moderate intensities promotes the growth of perennial grasses.

Sheep are nature's weed eaters. They control noxious and invasive weeds without the use of chemical or mechanical practices. One such weed is leafy spurge which is so competitive that it quickly crowds out all other plants. It reduces the land's market value and degrades grazing capacity, reducing profitability and productivity of livestock operations. The sheep will consume the top growth which, in turn, reduces plant vigour and seed production. Sheep primarily eat the flowers and vegetative shoots of the weed. They also strip leaves from mature stems. Repeated grazing weakens the spurge plants and allows grasses to become more productive.



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By-Products

While the two main products from sheep are meat and wool, there is still a great deal of products that can be made from the carcass after the meat has been removed.

Retail Meats: leg of lamb, pot roasts, lamb chops, round steaks, rack of lamb.

From Intestines: sausage casings, instrument strings, surgical sutures, tennis racquet strings.

From Hide and Wool: lanolin, clothing, drum heads, luggage, yarns, artists' brushes, sports equipment, fabrics, rouge base, insulation, rug pads, tennis balls, felt, carpet, footwear, baseballs, hide glue.

From Fats and Fatty Acids: explosives, solvents, chewing gum, paints, cosmetics, dog food, ceramics, soaps, creams and lotions, crayons, candles, shampoo, chemicals.

From Bones, Horns, and Hooves: syringes, gelatin, piano keys, marshmallows, pet food ingredients, combs, buttons, bone meal, ice cream, bone china.

From Manure: nitrogen fertilizer, potash, phosphorus, minor minerals.

Industry in Saskatchewan

Production: 138,000 sheep and lambs
(2020)

Number of Producers: 900 (2020)

Value to Economy: \$9.4 million—\$11.8
million in farm cash receipts

Industry in Canada

Production: 1,277,000 sheep and lambs
(2020)

Number of Producers: 11,000 (2020)

Value to Economy: \$190,000,000 in farm
cash receipts

Glossary

Ewe: mother sheep

Lamb: baby sheep

Ram: adult male