

NNY Sheep & Goat Newsletter – November 2008

From the Cornell Cooperative Extension of St. Lawrence County Extension Learning Farm,
Canton, NY

By Small Livestock Educator Betsy Hodge

Hi folks,

Mike Thoney, from Cornell, will be in town for a sheep meeting Wednesday November 19th at 6:30 pm at the Extension Learning Farm classroom. Mike is the sheep specialist and the person who puts together the sheep symposium and directs the research at the Teaching and Research Center sheep barns. He will discuss different feeding strategies, costs and how they fit into different management styles with an emphasis on how to minimize your costs. He will also talk about the recent and current research being done at the sheep barns at Cornell. This meeting will be our North Country Shepherds meeting for November. It would be helpful if you registered with our office at 315-379-9192 so we have an idea how many will be attending.

The fall lambs are filling out nicely. The oldest ones, born around September 15th are really thick and blocky. The youngest ones are only two weeks old and still look like babies. They are eating creep feed and munching on the hay, too. Now is a good time to look around the pen and observe the ewes. Most of them started out chunky. The older ones are showing weight loss, a sign that it might be time to cull them after this lambing. Looking at the lambs, there are a few that still look hungry because the ewe isn't producing enough milk or might have a one sided udder. I will check those to be sure the lamb doesn't have extra sharp teeth which keeps the ewe from letting them lamb much or some other thing wrong with it. Soon the creep feeder will cover up some of the difference when these lambs eat enough creep feed to make up the difference.

November 3rd I closed the main flock out of the pastures and confined them to the hill out back of the barn and the barnyard. We are now feeding them round bales and they will eventually get haylage. From an agronomic stand point I probably should have closed the sheep out of the pastures a little sooner to give the grass a chance to recover a little more before winter. However, I'm hoping the spell of nice weather after the snowstorm will give it a boost. The sheep don't have to speak English to convey their unhappiness about the pasture being closed off. They stand at the closed gate and give me dirty looks.

Last month I mentioned how the sheep walk right over the nice lush grass in September and seem to waste it. After asking around, we came up with some theories...one is that the grass may be lower in sugar do to the shortening days and less sunlight or maybe because the plane is pulling nutrients down into the roots for winter. Another idea is that the forages start putting anti-freeze type compounds into their leaves in preparation for winter and that these substances have an off taste. At any rate, after a couple hard frosts the sheep seem to get over this and eat the grass anyways. Whether that is because the taste changes again, they just get used to it or they get hungry enough to eat it remains to be determined.

November is our Scrapie inspection month. On November 24th at 10:00 am Jennifer Herne will visit our flock and look over our records and look at each sheep and their

tattoo/eartags to be sure we have the sheep we say we do. After the Extension Flock we will go to my home flock and do the same thing there. Anyone interested in the process is welcome to come and observe/help. The Extension flock has been inspected enough years to be certified and my home flock is still in the process.

Charlie and Brent and I sat down and talked about what was feasible for a flock demonstration for next year. We decided to split the flock and lamb half in April and pasture-raise the lambs. The other half will be bred for fall and creep fed and sold for the Christmas market. We will keep track of our labor requirements and the feed costs for both groups as well as the prices we receive on marketing the lambs and do a comparison. Some challenges we see are lambing on pasture with predators and holding sheep to lamb in the fall and hoping they actually do lamb in the fall. I am anxious to see the results myself.

At home I spent some time pushing a pencil this week. I have 9 lambs in a pen in the barn at my house (actually they are in two pens – one for the rams and one for the ewes). The rest of my lambs were sold to the Dolans around Labor Day. These 9 are what were left. A few are the smaller replacement ewe lambs that were smaller triplets or born late in the lambing. The bigger replacements are out with the flock. The rest in the pen are destined for the freezer either sold to individuals or to be sold as cuts.

The hay they are eating is good quality and expensive. They are getting some lamb grain as well. I got to wondering whether I am coming out ahead by feeding the lambs. I definitely needed to get them bigger before they would be good for the market I was planning for them so I wanted them to grow well and put on a little finish. Then we ran into the slaughterhouse bottleneck and they can't go until December 31. Sooo...what I want to know is whether they are gaining enough to justify feeding them expensive feed.

Checking my receipts, I found that grain was costing 17 cents a pound and hay was running 12 cents a pound (purchased and delivered and testing 13% protein). I brought in a scoop of grain and measured it with my kitchen scale to be really accurate. It weighed 30 ounces and I feed two in the morning and two at night. That turns out to be .83 lbs of grain per lamb per day or \$1.27 per day for the group. After figuring their hay intake and it turns out I am feeding \$3.24 per day in hay for the group. The total for the group was \$4.51 per day. Divide that by the 9 lambs and you get about \$.50/lamb per day for feed.

Now to figure out their average daily gain...I used weights taken in mid-September and early October, two weeks apart. I added all the weights and found the difference and divided by the number of lambs in the pen. They had gained just over 4 pounds each or .30 pounds per day. Therefore it costs me \$1.67 per pound of gain. Prices at New Holland were about \$1.30 per pound for the size these lambs were then. So I'm not making money putting gain on these lambs. It doesn't mean I can't make any money on them because I have very little invested in them over the summer except the upkeep of the ewes. I figure I will have to get about 5 to 6 dollars a pound (average) of retail cuts when I sell the lambs to break even. I guess I have to sit down and figure out what it actually costs me per ewe to keep them over the winter...a project for next month. I am also anxious to weigh the lambs again. They look like they have grown

well and I have diluted the lamb grain with whole corn which is cheaper since these lambs are getting their protein from the hay.

In October I had the pleasure of attending the Sheep and Goat Symposium at Cornell. Sandy vonAllmen, Scott Davis and his wife and Joe Seavey were also there representing the North Country. There were lots of good presentations which covered a range of skill levels. There was a trade show and good meals. Several state wide committees meet at this time, too, like the Empire Sheep Producers and the state sheep advisory board. I hope to expand on what we learned at the symposium in future newsletters.

The North Country Shepherds have a December meeting planned for Saturday December 13th. We will meet at the Extension Learning Farm at 10:00 am to hear Al and Rita Ostrander talk about their sheep operation and sheep shop/bed and breakfast. At 11:00 am we will get a tour of the barns and shop and can do a little Christmas shopping while we are there. Anyone who would like to go out to lunch afterwards as a group can do that, too.

This winter we will have a series of meetings focusing on grass-feeding and grass-finishing beef and lamb. The last weekend in February will be a large pasture meeting in cooperation with Martha Pickard of the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA). We are hoping to bring in Gene Schreifer from Wisconsin who has a lamb and beef grazing operation. There will also be meetings for beef producers the week of March 10th and for sheep producers the week of March 24th that will cover the basics of pasture and the grass-fed regulations as well as marketing grass fed meats. I'd also like to run some meetings on goat care basics.

Sheep for Sale – Several producers have sheep for sale in our area. Pete Fiske wants to cut his flock down a little and will sell thirty ewes from his very productive Dorset flock. \$100.00 a piece if he picks them, \$125 a piece if you pick them. These are well cared for productive sheep and would make a good starter flock for someone that has the forage to feed them over the winter. Call Pete at 315-389-4489 or email at mfiske@twcny.rr.com.

There are some Suffolks for sale in Pennsylvania. Kurt Coons has

There are also sheep for sale

We may have a ram or two left for sale so if you are interested, contact me before December 12th.

Marketing News – The Empire Gouverneur Graded Christmas Sale will be December 13th. Animals can be delivered on Friday for grading. Contact Jack Bero at 315-287-0220 or his cell at 315-322-3500 for more information. Our fall lambs will be there.

Some producers have expressed an interest in a group truck to New Holland in November. Call Clif Cook at 315-344-7421 ASAP if you have animals to send. There were several loads that went to New Holland this fall. One was at the end of August, some also went for the end of Ramadan and then another load went on October 11th for the October 13th sale. Most producers were happy with the prices they received at all those different times. I heard prices ranging from \$1.21 to \$1.54 depending on lamb size. Goat prices were best at the first

sale reaching \$90.00 a head and down to half that for the last load although I am not sure they were comparable types of goats.

The wool pool October 11th brought in 5071 pounds of wool. Fortunately, Canadian Wool Growers sends a truck to pick up the wool. It will take them awhile to process the wool and send a check. Thanks go to the producers that helped with loading and also to Charlie and his son Eugene who also helped that day.