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# Lamb Marketing in Colorado

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## Quick Facts

Sheep numbers and slaughter capacity have decreased across the United States since the 1940s; a dependable and reliable market is vital.

Ideal slaughter lamb is growthy, fast-gaining, and will reach market finish with a Choice or better carcass at 115 pounds (52 kilograms); it will be well-muscled, have a high cutability, carry at least 0.15 inches (.4 centimeter) backfat.

Producers should sell slaughter lambs when they are ready and should realize more total lamb income by spreading marketings over three or four dates, rather than marketing all lambs at one time.

Problem lambs include: ram lambs, short scrotum lambs and long-tailed lambs. Pelts with wool lengths shorter than 3/8-inch (.9 centimeter) to not realize much value to the packer.



Figure 1: Example of an ideal-type slaughter lamb.

## Ideal Slaughter Lamb

The ideal slaughter lamb is a growthy, fast-gaining lamb. It will reach market finish with an acceptable carcass at 115 pounds (52 kilograms) or less. (This market weight is dependent on the genetic background and frame size of the lamb.) The lamb will grade Choice or better (see Service in Action sheet 1.801, *Lamb carcass grading*), be well-muscled, have a high cutability and carry enough fat cover to avoid excess carcass shrink loss in shipment.

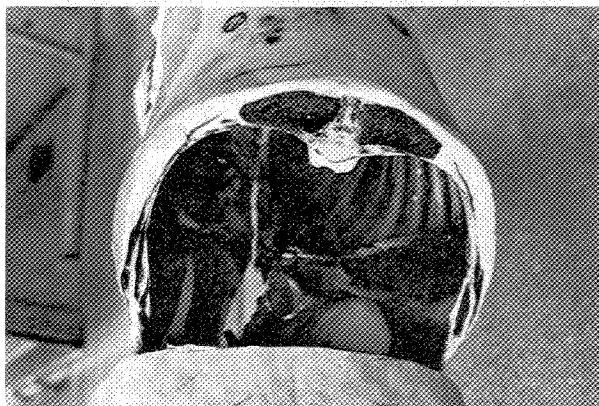


Figure 2: Example of the fat covering and loin eye of an ideal slaughter lamb.

Sheep and lamb numbers in the United States, as of Jan. 1, 1981, were estimated at 12.9 million head ... a far cry from the 45-million-head population of the late 1940s. Paralleling the decrease in sheep numbers has been a decrease in slaughter capacity. Not only has total number of head slaughtered decreased, but also the number of plants actually handling lamb.

This impacts the sheep producer because there are fewer individuals purchasing lambs at the point of production. As a result, producers must provide lambs that buyers want and follow recommended marketing practices. A dependable and reliable market is a basic requirement in any industry.

The recommendations that follow were formulated in a 1981 meeting of lamb buyers who purchase lambs in Colorado and the Inter-Mountain Region.

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There seems to be general agreement that an ideal slaughter lamb should carry at least 0.15 inches (.38 centimeter) of backfat. Lambs that carry 0.2 to 0.3 inches (0.5 to 0.8 cm) of backfat actually will have a higher percent carcass yield (dressing percent) than lambs with less backfat. However, the percent carcass yield should not be confused with yield grade that is a part of lamb carcass grading.

Heavy lambs (lambs over 115 pounds or 52 kg) are subject to varying price discounts, particularly during depressed-price periods. These price discounts may not be justified on larger-framed lambs that have the correct amount of backfat, *but present discounts are assessed on the basis of weight.* Changes in this buying practice probably will come about in the future.

## Orderly Marketing

Producers should sell slaughter lambs when they are ready. It is highly desirable for a healthy lamb marketing economy that a constant flow of lambs to packers be maintained, so that packers can provide consumers with a constant supply of lamb. The forage production patterns in the Inter-Mountain Region do not always allow an exact, even flow of lambs to packers. But lamb buyers think that steps should be taken to ensure as ideal an orderly flow of lambs to market as possible.

The bulk of Colorado lambs are born in March, April and May. It has not been unusual that marketing of March or early April lambs has been delayed until late September. With the early born lambs, this practice is questionable. The potential weight gain from holding lambs on pasture an extra month might not be as much as producers estimate. Earlier lambs should be marketed in August, when they have attained slaughter weight, are at slaughter finish and actually have a little more bloom.

Producers should realize more total lamb income by spreading their marketings over three or four dates in August and September, rather than bringing all lambs to market at one time. Strong consideration should be given to marketing March lambs in late July or August, April lambs in August or early September and May lambs in late September and early October.

For operations that are lambing over a three-month period, ewes and lambs should be identified by lambing date so that the lambs can be marketed accordingly. Orderly marketing is not the problem in Colorado that it is in neighboring states to the west—Idaho and Utah. However, Colorado producers should remember that late marketings from these two states impact Colorado marketing in August and September.

When possible, all ewes with single lambs should be put in one band and ewes with twin lambs in another band or bands. The single lambs should reach market weight and finish earlier and could be marketed earlier in the season than the twin lambs.

Light lambs can be a marketing problem. Management systems that incorporate early weaning as a management tool should be

examined, particularly in years that threaten drought and/or heavy predation. In these cases, lambs should be weaned at a minimum weight of approximately 50 pounds (23 kg) and sent to a feedlot for complete finishing and marketing.

## Problem Lambs

Problem lambs include: ram lambs, short scrotum (testicles pushed up into the body cavity) lambs, and long-tailed (not docked) lambs.

**Ram lambs and short scrotum lambs**, if properly grown, managed and marketed at a young age (130 days), are an acceptable product. A problem with them has surfaced in recent years. Many intact ram lambs do not reach marketable finish at a young age, and they end up in a feedlot. The marketability of these lambs is reduced for several reasons:

- ram lambs have a lower percent carcass yield and a lower slaughter grade than wether and/or ewe lambs;

- at slaughter it is more difficult to remove pelts from ram lambs;

- ram lambs create a feedlot problem in the fall when they become sexually active and breed ewe lambs (this sexual activity reduces ram-lamb gains and overall lot efficiency, because pregnant ewe lambs sell at a reduced slaughter price);

- ram lambs at slaughter are more inclined to have a softer fat with a yellowish cast that reduces the desirability of the carcass.

*Obviously, ram lambs should be castrated, and the short scrotum castration technique is not desirable and should be eliminated.* Ram lamb marketing should be kept to an absolute minimum, consistent with a producer's flock improvement and management program.

**Long-tailed lambs** are problem lambs. The tail on domestic lambs serves no purpose and no edible meat is recovered from the tail. Lambs should be docked shortly after birth. The pelts of long-tailed lambs are harder to remove in the slaughterhouse than those of lambs routinely docked.

Problem lambs should be identified to the buyer, price arrangements and discounts to be assessed should be made well in advance of the actual sale.

## Separation of Fats and Feeders

Good working facilities for dividing finished and feeder sheep should be available at the point of origin where separation is best accomplished.

Producers should make every effort to pool similar kinds and types of lambs for market shipment. Transportation costs per head will be lower if all trucks going to market are full. It takes just as much time to schedule a full load for slaughter as it does a partial load.

## Bruising and Related Problems

Bruising in Colorado lambs is not a major problem but when abnormally high the producer usually is notified. *Lambs should not be lifted or picked up by the wool.*

With the recent emphasis on preventive medicine and vaccinations, there are more problems with abscesses in the neck and shoulder carcass area. Vaccination in itself is not a problem, but the abscesses that develop from using dirty needles are. Producers should take every precaution to clean needles between each vaccination. This will prevent transfer of contaminants from one sheep to another.



**Figure 3:** Lambs should not be lifted or picked up by the wool.

### Use of Growth Promotants

Colorado sheep producers and sheep feeders are cautioned to use only growth promotants that have been cleared for use on sheep. "Ralgro" (an anabolic agent produced from corn mold) is the only growth promotant that is now being used extensively with lambs. Lamb buyers recognize the advantages of implants: higher rates of gain and improved feed efficiencies, but are quick to point out that the implant should be used wisely and may not necessarily be useful in all situations. It is a growth promotant that can be used on potential slaughter lambs. It should not be used on lambs where there is a possibility they will go back into the breeder herd.

The use of Ralgro on old crop lambs can be a disadvantage. Ralgro will hasten maturity, and if the lambs are old enough, their carcasses can end up in the yearling mutton category instead of in a lamb classification.



**Figure 4:** Growth promotants usually are implanted in the ears of lambs.

### Weight vs. Feed Efficiency

The drastic price decrease in the late fall-early winter of the 1980-81 lamb marketing season compounded financial losses to producers and feeders. The delayed marketing caused lengthened feeding periods with a resulting drop in feed efficiency. Measured as the amount of feed required to produce a pound of gain, feed efficiency decreases with increasing weight and increasing fat cover. This statement is well documented in research reports and is best illustrated by data from Washington State University<sup>1</sup>.

Lambs slaughtered at 99 pounds (45 kg), were consuming from 5.75 to 7.20 pounds of feed per pound-of-gain (5.77 to 7.25 kg of feed per kilogram-of-gain). Lambs slaughtered at 130 pounds (59 kg) consumed from 6.39 to 7.93 pounds of feed per pound-of-gain (6.43 to 7.98 kg of feed per kilogram-of-gain), while lambs slaughtered at 161 pounds (73 kg) consumed from 6.86 to 9.43 pounds of feed per pound-of-gain (6.90 to 9.49 kg of feed per kilogram-of-gain).

Feed efficiency declined from 19 percent to 31 percent as slaughter weight increased from 99 pounds to 161 pounds (45 kg to 73 kg). The cost of gain for feed increased by the same proportion. *Lambs should be slaughtered when they are ready.*

### Wool Growth on Pelts

If lambs are not shorn prior to slaughter, their pelts are classified as full wool pelts and there is no wool growth problem. Slaughter lambs, if shorn, should have at least 3/8-inch (9.5-millimeter) staple of wool growth for the pelt to qualify as a 'number 2' and 1/2-inch (12.7-mm) staple to qualify as a 'number 1' pelt. Pelts with wool lengths shorter than 3/8-inch (9.5 mm) do not realize much value to the packer.

The best place to appraise the shortest point for pelt credit is just above the front flank area close to the belly. The length of time on feed post-shearing is not always totally reflective of pelt grade.

### Reference

<sup>1</sup>E. Riquelene, E.L. Martin and J.K. Hillers. *Effect of Live Weight at Slaughter and Dietary Concentrate Level on Performance and Carcass Characteristics of Lambs*. Scientific Paper 4342, College of Agriculture Research Center, Project 14881, Washington State University, Pullman, Wash., 1971.