

More Sheep (don't have to) = More Work

Ben & Denise Bartlett

Log Cabin Livestock

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The unfortunate reality is that even with the current GREAT prices for sheep, it takes more and more sheep to pay for a new pickup, your health insurance or even the phone bill. It was that way last year, two years ago and it will continue to be that way into the future. Costs will continue to increase putting pressure on profit margins per head. The solution is to have more sheep. However, when I have asked producers why they don't have more sheep, I usually get three answers: – not enough land, not making enough money, and too much work- (making too much money has never been a response) . Let's look at some ways that having more sheep does not mean more "work".

Let's discuss the concept of "work". Work is not really the issue. The issue is the "gain for the pain", the value of your time. For example, if I offered you \$1,000/hr. to clean the barn with a pitchfork, it would probably not be "too much work" to do. Therefore I don't think the problem is that sheep are too much work; it's that we do a lot of work in the sheep business that does not pay very well and we are not rewarded for our time. The usual response is that a person needs to be more "efficient". However, most people consider being more efficient as working harder and faster instead of accomplishing more with less time and effort.

With these thoughts in mind, here are some ideas from the Log Cabin Livestock sheep operation that have helped us handle about 450 lambing ewes and a 150 hd. stocker steer operation as a part time operation in combination with two full time jobs. Important ! - These are ideas that have worked for us but you need to find your own ways to run more sheep with less work. We need to make changes again this year as we are one year older, costs have gone up, and the goals of our sheep operation keep changing. Hopefully these ideas can stimulate you to run more sheep, work less and make more profit.

Feed/manage "pens" and not numbers of sheep: It really doesn't take a lot more time to let 1000 sheep run through a gate to the next pasture than 100 sheep or feeding 10 round bales instead of one round bale. For many jobs, the getting started and ending can take as much time as the actual job. Except for 25 days of lambing, we try hard to never have more than three groups of sheep to manage. In the winter, it's mature ewes, ewe lambs, and then a pen of lambs on feed. In the summer, it's one group of ewes and lambs on pasture and one group of rams, two groups for most of the summer. In the fall we may have two groups of rams, existing and newly purchased in quarantine. Late fall would be weaned lambs and ewes in separate groups plus rams, again 3 groups. Keep it simple and as few as groups as possible.

Make your sheep do as much of the work as possible: Let the sheep take care of themselves. Keep sheep on pasture to reduce feeding work and cost, (pasture is cheaper than stored feed), spread their own manure, and have water and minerals that easily move with the sheep. Good pasture with a good grazing system is a great ration that can meet the needs of many different kinds of sheep. If you have to move feed to sheep, let equipment do the heavy lifting and do it as infrequently as possible. Again, it's usually easier to move the sheep to the feed (they are self-propelled) than the feed to the sheep. Use temporary fencing to keep sheep working instead of you.

What do you mean your sheep can't live off the land"? I bet 95% of your sheep can do just fine on pasture, will take care of two lambs, and will respect and stay in the fence. The 5% that are trouble makers or need handouts should get a one way ride to town. Any work you do for your sheep should be helping them do their job and not doing their work for them. Whatever you do, do not let the sheep make you do extra work for just for a few sheep like hand feeding a few sheep in the barn that won't stay in the fences. (Who's running this operation?)

Make the time to manage and monitor your operation: There are two kinds of work – planned and un-planned. Planned is better since you can pick the time, the day, fit it into your schedule and whether you need extra assistance. You should not run out of pasture or run out of feed unexpectedly and you should have a planned parasite control program. Realistically, when you work with animals and the weather, you can't plan everything. Therefore, what you need is to have a plan A and then a plan B and C just in case. If you have backup plan(s) ready, then it is not a big problem if something does not go as planned. A lot of this comes with experience; just taking the time to review what happened last time is a start. We all need to try new things to stay competitive and to find new ways to do things easier. If you're unsure of trying something different, just answer the question, "What will I do if this new idea doesn't work?" before you start. That's your plan B. If 10% of your new ideas don't work, you are not trying enough "new ideas".

Hire strategic help: Lambing is always a time crunch for us. Getting the most live lambs possible out of the ewes we fed all winter and having those ewes feed lambs on low cost pasture all summer is a key profit ingredient. Number of live lambs is critical and having good ewes is important but with UP weather, sometimes people have to put in the time to keep lambs alive. We found we could not do the feeding, the lambing, the care for ewes in jugs, and raise orphan lambs for 20 days straight without something getting shorted. We now hire a neighbor lady to feed jugs and the orphan lambs. That allows us to focus on checking sheep, doing records and adjusting to any weather challenges, things critical to live lambs this year and in the future. If we save one more lamb a day it pays the help, we are money ahead and also get a lot more sleep. Do the numbers; a lot of time you can hire people to do the \$10 an hour work and you can focus on the \$100 hr jobs. Don't neglect the important work: management, checking body condition, balancing rations, and "thinking of a better way". One more very important strategic helper on our place is our Border Collie. It has taken us a while to learn how to let a dog help us but letting the dog do a lot of the leg work makes both the dog and us very happy. Our dog is priceless, especially as we get older and slower. IF you have a good~ average dog and IF you will let the dog do what he instinctively knows how to do, dog can really make more sheep – less work.

Have a flock mentality and don't focus on individual ewes in the flock: In New Zealand and out West, 2000 ewes is just a small flock and our Midwest bias that "100" sheep is a lot of sheep is really holding us back. The flock mentality includes strategically using new products and new knowledge to help solve 'flock' issues. Examples would be fenceline weaning, pasture watering systems, using a handheld electronic device to sync with your computer for easier electronic record-keeping in the barn, having a sheep chute and gate system to make working sheep a one or two-person task. Hold your sheep as accountable as you would any other help you hire. Get rid of the free loaders and slackers to eliminate those sheep that don't fit your system.

When you finish this article- identify just one place on your operation where you could do less work, or better yet, what jobs you can just 'not do'. We need to keep more sheep to maintain or increase our income; we all need to work harder at not working so much.