Cattle, Sheep and Goats
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In General

- Sheep and goats are NOT small cows! They have unique nutritional requirements and reproductive systems, and require different management for healthy and productive animals.
- There are meat breeds and maternal breeds. Meat breeds have fewer lambs but good carcasses and fast growth. Maternal breeds have more lambs but slower growth and poorer carcasses.
- There are meat breeds and dairy breeds of goat. Dairy breeds are milked and managed similar to dairy cows; meat breeds carry more muscle and are raised for their carcasses.
- Sheep and goats are smaller and easier to handle than cattle. With high levels of productivity they require more labour particularly when birthing. With high production and small body size they also need better feed and management.
- There are also wool breeds of sheep that produce high quality fibre for production of fabrics for clothing.

Economics

- Both lamb and goat consumption is increasing partially due to growing ethnic demand. 41% of the lamb consumed in Canada is produced here; 72% of import comes from New Zealand.
- Lamb prices in Alberta are set in the global market. Large producing countries like New Zealand, Australia, Europe and the US impact the prices here.
- There is one federally-inspected slaughter plant in Alberta that buys and processes lambs. It will on occasion do custom kill for small numbers of goats. Meat from a federally inspected processor can be shipped to other provinces to meet the high demand of ethnic markets.
- Lamb and goat meat can be sold directly to consumers from provincially-inspected slaughter plants. Meat from provincially inspected processors cannot be shipped to other provinces.
- To be profitable, a sheep flock should be managed to market two lambs per ewe per year.
Nutrition

• Feed is the number one cost and is key to profitability. For assistance in balancing rations consider [www.sheepbytes.ca](http://www.sheepbytes.ca) or cowbytes.
• Sheep and goats graze weeds and brush that cattle prefer not to eat. Goats are browsers and prefer leafy, woody shrubs. Both of them have very small mouths and can graze closer to the ground. With any livestock, pasture management is very important to prevent over-grazing.
• Sheep and goats need mineral that is specifically formulated for them. Sheep are sensitive to copper and goats are sensitive to phosphorus. Cattle supplements are formulated for cattle and can be toxic to sheep and goats as can hog and poultry supplements and feeds.
• Sheep can digest whole grain. Other than for baby lambs, sheep do better when grains are left unprocessed. (rolled, steamed, ground).
• Because of their smaller size, sheep and goats don’t have the rumen space for very coarse or high fibre roughages such as straw. Lambs from meat breeds can easily gain over a pound per day in the feedlot.
• Lambs/kids, and dry ewes/does are routinely fed silage as an economical forage source. Sheep and goats are susceptible to listeriosis so silage quality and spoilage needs to be monitored more than for cattle. Pregnant ewes/does carrying multiple offspring cannot eat enough silage or have enough rumen space for high fibre forage to meet their nutritional requirements so should be fed high-quality hay.
• Lactating does and ewes nursing twins or triplets need to be fed as if they are high-producing dairy cows – high quality forage, adequate protein and energy.

Breeding

• Sheep and goats are seasonal breeders. The estrus cycle is affected by diminishing day length - females come into heat as the days get shorter.
• Natural breeding season is September to December. Gestation is about 144 - 150 days so natural lambing and kidding is February to May. Conception rates and birth rates are highest in season.
• Ewes/does can breed out of season but require management of body condition score, nutrition, genetics and often the use of artificial hormones. Varied success in out-of-season breeding adds to costs. Artificial insemination is more successful in does than in ewes.
• Ewe lambs and doelings are expected to give birth at one year old. In order to grow and also maintain a pregnancy they must be managed separately from mature ewes and fed to meet their body needs. Well grown ram lambs and young bucks can be used for breeding when they are 6 to 8 months old. Some breeds mature earlier and need to be separated from young ewes/does.
Lambing and kidding

• Multiple births are common with both sheep and goats making labour needs high when there are larger numbers of lambs/kids being born. As a result sheep and goats need more attention at lambing/kidding than cows do at calving. Shelter and bedding requirements are also higher.
• Lambs/kids are more prone to hyperthermia than calves because of their high percentage of exposed skin to body size. Some breeds are more vigorous at birth but all newborns chill rapidly.
• With a higher number of multiple births, lambs/kids also have to share the colostrum and milk supply with other siblings.
• Triplet lambs and kids need supplemental feeding. To successfully raise orphans or extra lambs/kids use a good lamb milk replacer, carefully following manufacturers’ instructions and keep all feeding and pens clean.

Housing

• A barn and corrals are commonly used for raising sheep and goats in Alberta where inclement weather can affect the health and comfort of the animals. Goats in particular need shelter from wind and weather. Well-bedded sheep in full fleece can withstand relatively cold, dry weather.
• Sheep/goats need shelter from the elements at birthing time and after shearing.
• A ewe/doe and her newborn lambs/kids are usually put in a small claiming pen by themselves for the first few days so they bond before being turned out with a larger group. Sheep need good ventilation if they are in a barn. In addition to moisture given off through respiration, wet wool can give off moisture. Hence, shearing ewes before lambing keeps the barn cleaner and drier as well as making more space for the ewes. High humidity is a problem for lambs/kids in barns and can contribute to pneumonia and scours.
• Sheep and goats need good pasture fences to keep them in – either page wire or electric. Sheep and goats can readily go through a barbed wire cattle fence. Additional wires, often electric, must be added. The key to keeping sheep and goats inside a pasture is to ensure there is enough good forage.
**Health**

- Buy high-health sheep and goats from farms on a certified health program to manage flock health.
- Good biosecurity helps avoid bringing in infectious diseases such as foot rot or abortion diseases. Work with a veterinarian to set up a flock/herd health management program. All livestock need vaccinations, internal and external parasite control, and veterinary treatments when necessary. Sheep and fibre producing goats need annual or bi-annual shearing.

**Predators**

- Coyotes and other predators are a huge problem for sheep and goats on pasture.
- Predation can be reduced and in some cases prevented by management that uses a combination of electric fencing, night penning, guardian dogs. Hunting/trapping may be necessary.
- Properly managing carcasses by deep burial, burning or composting is very important.
- Predator resistant fencing is expensive, and can make pasturing uneconomical for raising lambs and kids.
Legislation

• All Alberta farms with livestock must have a registered Premises Identification (PID) number.
• Cattle and sheep legally must have a Canadian Cattle or Sheep Identification Program approved RFID ear tag before they can be moved off the farm of birth. Sheep RFID tags must be purchased from the Canadian Cooperative Woolgrowers (1-800-567-3693)
• Currently there are no legal requirements for tagging goats.
• There is strict legislation covering the sale of meat and milk sold in Alberta.