

# DORSET COMMERCIAL CONNECTION

## Are You Producing What Your Market Wants?

by Melanie Barkley, PSU Extension Educator

I recently attended the Howard Wyman Sheep Leadership School in Columbus, OH and thought this would be a great opportunity to share some of the information presented at the school. One of the main themes at the school was to think like a packer so you would gain a better understanding of the type of lambs they are looking for. During the school we evaluated live lambs, followed them through the harvest process and then evaluated carcass characteristics and yield. We also toured some local farms to learn how they are producing lambs for various markets. Here are a few points to highlight some of the information learned at the school.



**Katherine Harrison of Blystone Farm discusses how their farm meets the needs of their ethnic customers.**

**Muscling:** Obviously, a meat packer is looking for a well muscled lamb that will hang up a heavily muscled carcass. The leg should be well developed and of course we would like to see a large loin eye. If you handle the loin in a live lamb, you should be looking not just at width across the top, but also loin depth. Research has shown (or just ask Dr. Henry Zerby at Ohio State) that the shape of the loin eye can greatly affect size in square inches. Shallow loins are shaped more like an oval as compared to deep loins that are more round in shape. It was amazing how much larger those rounder shaped eyes were in the lambs we evaluated at the school. Translated into weight for the packer, we saw a 2.45 square inch eye yield a 6.89 lb. loin as compared to a 3.1 square inch eye that yielded a loin that weighed 7.07 lbs. I thought it was also interesting that the lamb with the 2.45 square inch loin eye weighed 158 lbs live, while the lamb with the 3.1 square inch loin eye weighed 132 lbs. To really make this interesting, the calculated carcass value of the heavier (and lighter muscled) lamb was \$232.45 and the carcass value of the other lamb was \$240.10. To us, this looks like a small difference, but across hundreds of lambs a day to a large packer, it becomes very important. It should also make us think a bit harder about the importance of muscling in our lambs.

**Amount of Finish:** I always find it interesting that while we shoot for .1 inch of backfat in a carcass contest, this really

isn't enough finish for a packer. This .1 inch of backfat would translate into a 1.4 yield grade and packers prefer yield grades of 2 to 3. This is because the additional fat cover protects the meat from drying out while the carcass is hanging in the cooler. To get a yield grade 2 to 3, a lamb needs .16 to .35 inches of backfat.

**Adding Value to a Leg:** This is an area that I could see packers doing more of in the future. This would also be an option if you are selling any retail cuts directly to customers. During the school we boned out a leg of lamb and looked at the individual muscles that make up the leg. Many families can't eat an entire leg of lamb at one meal. Plus, with the fast pace of today's lifestyle, roasting a leg is reserved for special occasions such as holiday dinners. By separating muscles, these can be prepared in a variety of ways AND be cooked quickly by grilling. For example, the cuts can be rolled in spices or marinated for additional flavor. Their smaller size also fits the needs of a "typical" family. The bottom round can even be made into an awesome pastrami for cold cut sandwiches. Other cuts we looked at included top round, sirloin, eye of round, and shanks. Dr. Kuber from Ohio State served as head chef for the event and provided participants with recipes for the meals that we ate during the school. Lamb was served in a variety of ways at all meals so that we could have first-hand experience with these recipes. We even ate lamb for breakfast in an omelet.

**Producing for Your Market:** One day of the school was devoted to tours of local operations. Two of the operations really impressed me in how they meet the needs of their market. One producer is selling lamb and goat to ethnic populations in the Columbus area. Customers come to the farm and pick out the animal they want and can then wait while that animal is harvested and processed to their individual specifications. The other operation that impressed me feeds out about 6,000 lambs a year for cruise ships. These lambs are harvested at 150 to 180 pounds so that they yield a larger lamb chop.

The school really offers a lot of information from production to marketing. If you can clear your schedule, I highly recommend the Leadership School as well as the Lamb 509 course taught by Dr. Zerby. These are well worth the time and are useful for helping you further develop your sheep flock to meet the needs of the meat industry. For more information on future schools, contact the National Lamb Feeders Association at [www.nlfa.org](http://www.nlfa.org).



**Lambs raised by the Hawk family at Skyline Turkey Farm (the turkey barns were converted to handle lambs) are marketed at heavier weights to provide larger loin chops for the Cruise Ship trade.**