

DORSET COMMERCIAL CONNECTION

Winter Time Farm Planning

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Right now as I look outside the window, the snow is flying and the sun is trying to peak through the clouds. It is very cold and I would much rather be inside where I am warm. So, it's a great time to take advantage of a little "inside time" to do some farm planning for the spring and summer.

Grain costs are increasing on a daily basis at the moment and maintaining the sustainability of a sheep operation could hinge on how to best use the forage resources on your operation. Have you run a soil test lately on your pasture fields? A great way to do some planning is to use an aerial photo of your farm or ranch and note the various pasture fields. Consider differences in soils, slopes, and topography to determine how to plan what fields and how many need tested for the coming year. Some soil amendments, such as lime, should be added in the fall or over the winter to give the soil pH time to change before the spring growing season.

For many operations, soils differ between pastures and thus different species of forages should be planted to those fields. Thinking back to the last year's growing season, are there fields that were thinning or have large percentages of weeds growing in them? Now is a good time to plan for changes to make these fields more productive. Does the soil fertility need adjusted? Are there other forages species that you would like to introduce into these fields? Do you need to look at weed control options? Don't be too quick to rip up the sod and replant; often pasture production is greatly increased simply by adjusting the soil fertility.

Do you have adequate options for providing water to the sheep in your pastures? Sheep, like any other livestock species, prefer to graze close to a water source. In

large fields, they will tend to overgraze the areas closest to water and spend very little time grazing areas farther away from the water source. Are there options for decreasing the size of some fields and adding another water source to



Winter time planning for internal parasite control can help to eliminate problems such as the bottle jaw exhibited by this ewe.

encourage better utilization of the pasture forages? Are there any changes that could be made to the health management program for your sheep? What were your major challenges last year and what adjustments to management or health care could be made to decrease or eliminate those challenges? These challenges could include anything from internal parasites to diseases to foot problems.

Culling practices can often need adjustments on many livestock operations. Examine ewes critically for udder problems, feet and leg issues, lambing issues, and body condition. As you record lambing information, you might also write down any comments related to lambing: weak lambs, large teats, mothering problems, etc. The CDC office has a great lambing record on cardstock that has a section to write down these comments. Circle the number of the ewe in your records so you don't forget to cull her after her lambs are weaned. You might also leave the tails on lambs that should not be kept for breeding purposes.

Winter is also a good time to set production goals for your sheep operation. Are you satisfied with your weaning weights? What is your lambing percentage? Would your operation be more profitable with a higher lambing percentage? Are your ewes capable of raising twins without addition assistance on your part? Answers to these questions can be helpful when looking for that new ram that will continue to advance the profitability of your sheep operation.

For more suggestions on how to evaluate the sustainability of your operation, ATTRA (<http://attra.ncat.org/index.php>) has developed a small ruminant sustainability check sheet that can be found on the internet at <http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/ruminantcheck.pdf>. This checklist can help producers take a look at forages, livestock, marketing, records, economics, quality of life and other areas to improve. Even with sheep prices at the highest in history, we can always make plans to become more sustainable with our production methods.



Winter is a great time to plan for changes that need made to soil fertility or forage species in pastures.