



# WE OFFER WAYS TO KEEP SHEEP VENTURE PRO

*Kellie Chichester*

Each spring brings not only green-ing pastures, but also a new crop of baby animals that catch our attention as they kick up their heels in crisp spring air.

Becoming enamored with those fuzzy lambs is especially easy, and soon you may find yourself thinking, "I should get some sheep!"

There are many aspects of animal care to consider before jumping into this new adventure. We'll cover a few of these considerations here, including investments of time, infrastructure, and other basics.

## **Time Demand**

Responsible ownership of livestock requires a significant investment of time. Just like a pet, these animals need constant care. Weekend trips and vacations will now be complicated by having to find someone to take over the daily responsibilities of delivering feed and water. You will need to weigh the benefits of caring for livestock against the changes to your lifestyle that will need to occur to properly care for them.

## **Choose Your Breed Carefully**

Before you begin a venture, decide why you are purchasing the livestock; will you be raising them for meat, fiber, both, a 4-H/FFA project?

This helps you decide which sheep breed to invest in, because after all, it will be an investment. Find a reputable breeder once you've decided which purpose your sheep will have. This should be a person who will ultimately help you get started; they should be willing to answer your questions. Start with healthy animals. If the deals sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

## **Housing Needs**

You will need to provide pen space or pasture and shelter to get them out of the elements when needed. These facilities may be the most costly investment of the venture. Be sure pens or corrals are adequate to



# FITABLE AND WOOLY, NOT WILD

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house sheep. Woven wire is the most common sheep fencing. Mesh wire or hog panels will work as well. Build pens to keep sheep in and, more importantly, predators out! Housing requirements vary depending on climate, lambing season, and management preferences. If lambing during extreme weather, you may choose a

more elaborate barn. If your lambing season falls during more mild weather, requirements may be less.

You will need to clean and maybe bed the area. Door sizes may need to be considered if planning to use equipment to clean the area. Decide if you will store feed and bedding and if you will need water and electricity to the building.

Site location is important. You don't want to have to trench 2 miles of water line; pick a site conveniently located to your activities. Ventilation is important if lambing in the winter – you don't want the barn too closed up or drafty. Fresh air is a must. Poor ventilation could lead to respiratory problems. Provide bedding to keep

new babies warm and comfortable if you will be lambing in extreme weather. Straw is the most commonly used bedding. Any small grain straw is acceptable, the most common being oats, wheat, rye, or barley. Straw is the preferred bedding to raise fiber sheep. This will not get bedded into the fleece. Sawdust is acceptable for meat or hair sheep.

## Feeding Needs

You may want to graze the animals during the year if your property allows. Contact your local extension office if unsure how many animals the property will support and have them walk through how to assess your resources. Understanding the grasses and their growth habits will help guide the grazing plan.

Animal feed may need to be supplemented during periods of grass growth or lambing. Quality feed is important for good animal performance. The animal's nutritional requirements will be highest during late gestation and peak milk production. Young animals may still be growing while raising their first set of lambs. Meeting their nutritional requirements is important.

## Other Considerations

- You may not be in a location where a veterinarian can get to you in a timely manner. You may want to have some basic first aid supplies on hand, as accidents do happen. You will also need to visit with your veterinarian about animal health requirements. There may be vaccinations/wormers



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you will want to give during the year to keep your animals' performance at its best. Your vet can help with lamb care (for example, banding tails and castration).

- You will need a ram if planning to raise multiple generations of sheep. Their maintenance is low, but you will need to keep him separate from the ewes at times. This will require additional pen space and feed resources.
- You will need to start thinking about marketing once the first set of lambs is on the ground. Will you keep them all? What will you do with the wether lambs (castrated male sheep)? Are you

going to be taking them to the sale barn? Will you use them for meat? Having an idea beforehand will help you market them for maximum profit.

- Shearing will be more important if raising wool sheep than if for hair or meat. Find a shearer or learn how. If you chose to learn yourself, there may be a considerable investment in equipment that might not make sense for a handful of animals. Depending on the breed, genetics, age, and nutrition, sheep can produce 2 to 30 pounds of wool annually; the average weight per fleece is 7.3 pounds.

- Marketing wool is another consideration. Wool of higher quality can be sold to artisans for making crafts. Lower quality is generally sold for blending with other wool or materials.

You may just try raising a lamb through to market to see if having sheep on a full-time basis is something you really want to do. It is an investment with added responsibility and not for everyone. If serious about keeping sheep year-round, work with knowledgeable folks.

Things will not always go as you hope, there may be death loss that you hadn't planned for, but that is part of raising livestock!

**Kellie Chichester** knows sheep are far more valuable than for counting to get to sleep. She is the University of Wyoming Extension educator serving southeast Wyoming and specializes in profitable and sustainable agricultural systems. She can be reached at [kelliec@uwyo.edu](mailto:kelliec@uwyo.edu).