**Managing Sheep on Pasture**

(Adapted from [**Managing and Utilizing Pasture and Harvested Forages for Sheep**](http://www.agry.purdue.edu/ext/forages/publications/id-153.htm) Purdue University)

Forages supply approximately 80 percent of the yearly nutritional requirements for sheep. Sheep are especially efficient in converting forages into protein (in both the wool and meat) and compete less with humans for edible grain crops than other livestock species. Because sheep graze, they take less energy to produce than animals that require harvested and stored grains and forages.

There is much land in Manitoba better suited to growing forage crops than grain crops. When properly fertilized, fenced and managed, this land will produce abundant pastures and forages for sheep. Even on grain farms, there is usually some acreage that should be pasture. Adapted forage crops can reduce feed costs and give good economic return on high-priced land.

Animal performance and enterprise profitability depend, in no small measure, on how well the pasture is managed and utilized. Presented here are nine basic management practices that optimize the productivity of both the animals and the land they graze

Recommended Pasture Management Practices

1. Subdivide large pastures into paddocks for rotational grazing at a high stocking rate. An electric fence can be erected at a reasonable cost and easily moved. Rotational grazing reduces internal parasite infestation of sheep.
2. Vary the stocking rate to coincide with pasture productivity. This should result in greater plant vigor, more forage production and less weed problems. Too heavy a stocking rate eventually decreases the pasture stand and forage yield, while too low a rate reduces carrying capacity and results in forage waste.
3. Reduce the intake of non-lactating ewes by restricting their grazing time. A pasture's carrying capacity can be increased greatly when non-lactating ewes are restricted to 50 percent of the normal grazing time each week. Increasing the stocking rate and rotating pastures during the non-lactating period also reduces intake.
4. Adjust the lambing season to coincide with maximum pasture growth periods in the spring or fall. Cool-season perennial grasses reach their maximum growth in June and a second but smaller peak period in the fall. Ewes lambing in March or April make better use of spring pasture growth than ewes that lamb in January or February. These winter lambing ewes must be fed harvested feeds during the period of greatest nutritional needs. Ewes that lamb in September or October make good use of fall pasture growth during lactation. After weaning, which is the period of lowest nutritional needs, these ewes can be maintained on winter pasture, reducing the need for harvested forages.
5. Regardless of lambing time, provide additional energy in the form of grain to "flush" at breeding, during the last 4-6 weeks of pregnancy, and in the first 8 weeks of lactation. If low-quality forages are used, protein supplements are also recommended.
6. Separate ewes with single lambs from those with twin lambs, and creep feed the twin lambs on pasture. To reduce internal parasite infestation in lambs, separate the ewes and lambs daily. Allow the lambs to graze clean pasture while creep feeding.
7. If you raise both cattle and sheep, consider grazing them together. Sheep prefer shorter and tenderer grasses, while cattle will consume less tender growth. In addition, cattle may help in reducing predator problems. A ratio of 3-5 sheep for each beef animal will insure that the pasture is well utilized. Ewes nursing lambs may graze first and then be followed by cattle.
8. Control weeds and thistles. Although sheep will consume 90 percent of the weeds in a pasture, thistles and some other weeds will be left alone. Non-grazed weeds should be mowed when the animals are rotated to another area or controlled with an approved herbicide.
9. Fertilize pastures according to soil test. Optimum pasture production can only be attained with a proper fertilization program.

For additional information and to make some of the production management information in this article relevant to Manitoba Sheep production check with the MAFRD Sheep specialist and go to the MAFRD web site on sheep production at <http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/production/sheep/flock-management.html>

John McGregor, Extension Support  
MFGA