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Animal Science Reports

1967

Confinement Rearing of Sheep

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A. S. Series 67-24

Confinement Rearing of Sheep

Leon F. Bush[1]

There is a greater need for increased efficiency in the sheep industry than there has been at any other time. Increased costs for labor, equipment, feed, marketing etc. take more of the producers dollar while at the same time production remains about the same. The average lamb crop for this year in the United States is 92%, 2% below 1966. Lambing percentage must be stepped up and overall efficiency increased if we are to meet the increased operating cost.

Economic return per man unit of labor is of vital importance to the farm manager. A short supply of competent farm labor plus rising wages has stimulated interest in mechanization of all farm enterprises. Mechanization in the sheep industry has been slow while the use of confinement or semi-confinement management systems, labor saving equipment and special constructed housing has increased rapidly in the production of swine, cattle,and poultry. Confinement rearing of sheep presents the opportunity to use labor saving equipment and to intensify production.

In many areas increasing acreages are used for cultivated crops and less land is available for pasture. This trend will undoubtly continue to become more severe in the future. Scarity of land in European countries has promoted intensification of sheep production with either semi-confinement or total confinement management systems.

In a discussion of confinement rearing of sheep consideration should be given to the following:

1. Highly tillable land will yield more in cash crops, whether grain or forage, than when used as pasture. Harvesting and feeding forage from this land to sheep will result in higher production than when pastured.

2. Losses in preformance and death from parasites and bloat may be decreased.

3. The predatory problem would be lessened.

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4. Automation can be used more readily.

5. No increase in shelter or equipment would be necessary.

6. Ewes could be fed according to their needs. However, proper nutrition of the ewe and lamb may also be more critical.

7. Sanitation will be more critical. Good sanitation must be practiced to prevent disease from starting and spreading.

8. Provides an excellent opportunity to expand number of sheep produced.

9. Confinement also presents the opportunity to make use of new knowledge to induce estrus, estrus synchronization, artifical insemination and ova transfer.

A limited amount of research has been conducted on confinement of sheep. Idaho researchers compared continuous dry-lot feeding of ewes with pasture feeding. They reported that total annual feed cost per ewe was almost the same under both management systems. However, labor cost was slightly higher for ewes fed in dry-lot than those on pasture. They also found a lower per cent of twin lambs born to mature ewes maintained in dry lot. Jordan (Minnesota) did not find the reduced lambing rate in September bred ewes maintained in dry-lot all year. Jordan also reported that none of the ewe and lamb diseases, high mortality, difficulty at lambing or other problems associated with restricted exercise were noted in the total confined ewes. Ewes at these stations were not confined for the life time of the ewe.

We need to know more about the effect of total confinement on the ewe which is kept in confinement all her productive life. An experiment was started this year to study this long term effect. Nine lots of 24 yearling white faced ewes per lot were placed on three treatments. Each treatment is replicated three times. The treatments are (1) confinement of ewes all year, slotted floor in building, (2) confinement of ewes all year, conventional floor and (3) pasture during the summer, dry-lot in the winter. Ewes are bred to either Suffolk or Hampshire rams. Ewes will be lambed out in the building and lambs on treatments 1 and 2 will remain on the slotted or conventional floor from birth to market. Internal parasite infestation of ewes and lambs managed in dry lot all year and those on pasture during the summer will be studied. Complete preformance data will be kept on ewes and lambs to determine the effect of confinement. General health and behavior of the ewe will be observed. Results of the experiment will be reported as they become available.