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## Breeds for Ewes for the Western Cornbelt

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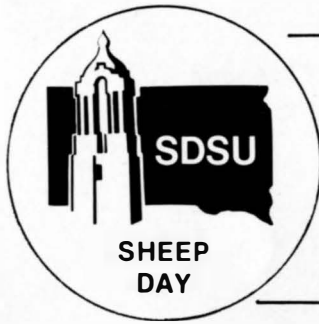
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## BREEDS FOR EWES FOR THE WESTERN CORNBELT

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There is an extreme amount of interest in the sheep business. Because of this not only are people in the business trying to expand their ewe numbers but there are also other prospective producers trying to get into the business, causing a severe shortage of breeding ewes of any kind.

The subject "Breeds of Ewes for the Western Cornbelt" might be approached from the point of view "beggars can't be choosers." At the moment about all producers can do is to make the best of the situation. This means that more ewe lambs that would normally go to market should be kept for use and some older ewes might be given another chance. Producers can, however, plan next year's production in such a way that there will be more ewe lambs available of the kind they prefer.

### SITUATION

Sheepmen with highly productive ewes should raise their own ewe replacements. Sheepmen who are looking for replacement ewes have two choices; they can look for local straightbred ewes that represent the kind of ewes they want in their flocks or they can look to the range area. If they are fortunate and find highly productive ewes locally, they should go ahead and buy them. There are relatively few such ewes in most areas. Most sheepmen are probably still going to have to look to the range area for some kind of ewes and then from those produce better ewes in case they are not happy with the productivity of the ones they can buy. The practice of producing one's own replacements is, in my opinion, going to become a way of life.

Many producers throughout this area have traditionally looked to the range area for sheep when they needed replacements. Since there were fairly large numbers there and ewe numbers were going down, there were usually plenty of some kind of ewe available. Currently, the numbers are relatively low and the people there are generally interested in staying in business or in expanding numbers. Consequently, the number of ewes available is greatly reduced. The ewe lambs or yearlings available in the range areas are usually those that are left after the producers select replacements. Some solid-mouth ewes of questionable background may also be available and during the summer and early fall there are usually some older ewes that are not judged to be sound enough for the range but which on a farm can produce a year or two longer. Any of these range ewes can be mated to some kind of

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ram that will produce crossbred ewes that may be more productive and certainly would be quite usable in commercial production under intensive farm conditions.

#### KIND OF EWES AVAILABLE ON THE RANGE

It is generally accepted that, under most range conditions, feed supplies are not as good as on many farms and consequently the kind of ewes available in those areas are usually those that have a relatively high value fleece and are not as productive of lambs as some of the mutton type ewes often found on farms. The range white-faced ewes which have been used for both wool and lamb production are of several breeds.

There are the fine-wool breeds which include Rambouillet and Merino (there are very few Merinos left) and then there are the so-called medium-wools which include the Targhee, Columbia, Panama and Corriedale or crosses among them. These breeds have some characteristics which prospective buyers should be aware of when making decisions as to which are more suitable for their conditions.

The Rambouillet breed of sheep is found in the largest numbers in West Texas and there are also some throughout the Rocky Mountain Region and the Northwest. The Rambouillet of today is larger and more open-faced than the ones that were available 20 to 30 years ago. They are fairly productive sheep under range conditions and are more productive under farm conditions than on the range. Compared to most mutton-type sheep, they do produce a large amount of high quality wool, are long-lived, quite hardy and have a long breeding season. These characteristics make them more suitable on the range and are of some advantage on a farm.

The Targhee breed is 1/4 Lincoln and 3/4 Rambouillet. They, therefore, have Rambouillet characteristics but may be a bit larger than some Rambouilllets and shear a bit coarser fleece. They do not have as long a breeding season as the Rambouilllets. The Columbia, Panama and Corriedale breeds can be characterized together in some ways. They are all 1/2 fine-wool and 1/2 Lincoln. This means that they are usually a bit larger than Rambouilllets (especially the Panamas and Columbias), have more open faces and coarser wool. They also have a more restricted breeding season in terms of being most efficiently reproduced when bred in the fall for spring lambing.

In terms of suitability for intensive lambing conditions on farms, all of the white-faced western breeds can be characterized as being reasonably hardy and producing valuable fleeces but not producing as many lambs as many intensive sheep producers would like. They are reasonably slow-maturing sexually so that they do not come into production as rapidly as some of the mutton breeds and tend to be fairly long-lived. They do serve as a kind of ewe that can be mated to rams of a more productive breed so that crossbred ewe lambs can be produced that are more productive than their range ewe dams.

Another kind of ewe available in the West is the black-faced crossbred. These may be speckled-faced ewes that are usually part Suffolk or more of a brown-faced crossbred that are usually part Hampshire. Usually their dams were some kind of a white-faced western ewe. If one can buy sound ewes with such breeding and they are to be bred for lambing in February, March or April, these ewes should be quite productive because they are crossbred ewes to begin with and either half-Hampshire or half-Suffolk, which are generally more productive than the usually white-faced range ewes.

#### BREEDS OF RAMS FOR CROSSING ON WESTERN EWES

There are not many choices of breeds of rams that might be considered for crossing on western ewes to produce good crossbred ewe replacements. The first that might be considered is the Dorset breed which has not been used extensively. The Dorsets as a breed are smaller than some people prefer, but they are white-faced and in crosses with western ewes produce pretty good quality wool. The principle advantage of the Dorset breed is that they have a very long breeding season so that, if sheepmen want to breed at nonconventional times, they can take almost any kind of a western white-faced ewe and cross them to a Dorset and have a crossbred ewe that will breed over a longer period of time and will also produce more lambs per ewe lambing. These are tremendous advantages. Research in crossbreeding indicates that Dorset breeding should be considered strongly if one is producing crossbred ewes for intensive production. Dorset x Rambouillet crossbred ewes are the most productive ewes that have been found for spring breeding and fall lambing. Under Oklahoma conditions, these crossbred ewes produce about 20% more lambs under fall lambing conditions than will Texas Rambouillet ewes. They will probably produce 30% more lambs under conditions of January and February lambing than will Rambouillet ewes. Ewes of this particular cross are reasonably early-maturing and also long-lived. They are a very successful ewe under conditions of breeding such as are found in the Southern Great Plains.

A new breed, the Finnish Landrace (often called Finnsheep), is now available in extremely small numbers but has some characteristics of interest to sheepmen involved in intensive sheep production. They have two outstanding attributes; they are extremely early-maturing sexually and extremely prolific. They are small to medium in size and produce white, dry wool of medium grade. Their season of breeding appears to be such that they are probably anestrous from early April until sometime in July, prohibiting breeding during that period of time. Ewes that are part Finnsheep would have somewhat restricted fertility during those months. The ewes have relatively poor conformation compared to what Americans are used to and are, therefore, frowned upon from that point of view. Ewes that are 1/4 or 1/2 Finnsheep and the remainder conventional breeding produce lambs that are only 1/8 or 1/4 Finnsheep when bred to mutton-type rams and the carcasses are highly desirable and are not usually detectable on the market.

As indicated earlier, the black-faced breeds of Suffolk and Hampshire when crossed on western ewes will usually produce a productive crossbred ewe. Suffolk crossbreeds are generally more available than Hampshire crossbreeds. In either case the crossbred ewe will probably be

larger in size than the western ewe to which the black-faced ram was mated and this may or may not be an advantage. Large ewes are better than small ewes in commercial production if they produce more lambs.

Suffolk ewes can be characterized as being large in size and producing large numbers of lambs that grow rapidly. The breed can be faulted, however, for having poor livability and producing relatively little wool that often has black fibers in the fleece. Suffolks are popular for crossing on white-faced ewes for market lamb production and, as indicated earlier, if ewe lambs from this mating are used as replacements, they are quite productive ewes. Such ewes probably should be mated to Hampshires if one wants to sell all of the lambs or could be mated to Dorset x Rambouillet crossbred rams if one wants to save replacements from them.

Hampshires were formerly used more extensively than in recent years and there is little reason to believe that Hampshire x western crossbred ewes are not still good ewes for farm production conditions. They have a bit more wool in the face than some producers want, but the ewes are productive and shear a bit heavier fleeces than the half-Suffolk ewes. If someone has half-Hampshire, half-western ewes, then he should consider mating them to Suffolk rams if he wants to produce all market lambs or, in the case of wanting to raise replacements, he might use Rambouillet x Dorset crossbred rams.

Many people believe that the white-faced breeds should be thought of more as the ewe breeds and developed for those characteristics that make good ewes. Crosses of these breeds should make up our commercial ewe flocks. Under these conditions one could use black-faced rams to sire lambs if all the lambs were going to slaughter; but some combination of white-faced breeds should be mated to these ewes if one wanted to produce ewe lamb replacements.

#### PRODUCING HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE EWES

Sheep producers need to decide what characteristics they want in their ewe flocks to suit their conditions. Such ewes will probably not be available and must be produced; and, by starting with what is available and making the kind of selections and matings necessary, one can produce the desired characteristics.

In deciding what breeds of ewes are to be used in the ewe flock, it is necessary to review the characteristics of good ewes for commercial, intensive sheep production. The ewes much more than the rams determine the reproductive rate of sheep and consequently real thought needs to go into selecting the right breed or breed combinations. Some characteristics of good ewes are that they (1) be very fertile at the time one wants to breed them, (2) have a high lambing rate as a result of mating at such times, (3) have early sexual maturity so that replacements come into production early, (4) have longevity so they will stay in the herd for a long time, (5) are good mothers that will accept and rear the lambs they have, (6) have good dispositions so they can be managed as a producer wishes, and (7) produce good quality wool so that this commodity can be a continued source of income to producers.

Keeping these things in mind, the white-faced range ewes that might be most commonly used to start a flock can be characterized as follows: ewes of the Rambouillet breed are slow-maturing sexually but are long-lived. They produce a good amount of high quality wool that is of the grade used in men's suiting and therefore valuable. The ewes have a long period of the year during which they are reasonably fertile but have an average to poor lambing rate. If reared under farm conditions, they are reasonably tame and easy to handle; but, when reared under fenced conditions on the range, they are usually wild. They are quite variable in size with some very large Rambouillet ewes in some areas but only average to small ewes in other areas. However, size is not a principle fault.

The white-faced western ewes would be different from Rambouillet ewes in that the Panamas and Columbias at least and the Targhees to some extent would be larger, their wool would be coarser and they would be a bit earlier maturing but not extremely early-maturing. Their longevity might not be as great as Rambouillets and they might produce a few more lambs, but they would not be expected to be highly prolific. They would not breed over as long a period of the year as the Rambouillets. They might produce a large amount of wool, but it would be a medium wool and not the grade normally used in men's suits.

Sheepmen starting a flock with white-faced western ewes can produce replacements with an extended breeding season, increased lambing rate and earlier sexual maturity by mating their ewes to Dorset rams. The use of a Finnsheep ram will produce replacements that are much earlier maturing sexually and whose lambing rate will be considerably increased. They will probably not mate very well during April to July, however. Dorset x Finnsheep crossbred rams could be used if available and the performance of their progeny predicted from the preceding statements. If the western ewes to be mated were Columbias, Panamas, Corriedales or black-faced crossbreds, it might be well to use Dorset x Rambouillet crossbred rams if one wants to extend the possible breeding season of his herd and make the wool a bit finer or Finnsheep x Rambouillet rams would make the replacements earlier maturing, more prolific and produce better fleeces.

The use of Hampshire or Suffolk rams to produce crossbred ewes will increase the ewes' size, increase lambing rate and increase problems of black fibers in the fleeces. If one does not plan to produce replacements, rams of these breeds produce excellent market lambs when used as terminal sires.

#### ADDENDUM

The production potential of a commercial lamb production enterprise is mostly determined by the genetic composition of the ewe flock, although the necessity of using fertile, aggressive males is recognized. It is highly unlikely that the majority of commercial sheepmen can find and purchase the kind of ewes best suited to their kind of production. Therefore, most sheepmen will need to produce their own ewes if they want good ones. Some are lucky; they already have a highly productive flock. Those entering the business who do not have the kind of ewes they eventually hope to have can make rapid progress toward a good ewe herd or flock by choosing the right breed of ram to mate to the kind of ewes available and thereby gain some control over the kind of ewes they will eventually have in their flocks. The importance of selecting from the best animals in the breeds used has not been discussed but is also essential to success.