

Sheep and Goat Newsletter – December 2012
From the Extension Learning Farm, Canton, NY
By Betsy Hodge

The sheep are still out there! It is November 27th and the sheep are still grazing in the hay fields down the road at the other farm. The hay was too short to cut for second cut so we took the sheep and the electro-net to the grass. They have two large steers guarding them and two smaller Holstein heifers hanging out with them. They are just about out of grass and the water is freezing in the tank so it is time to bring them all back to the main farm and switch them on to stored feeds and heated waterers.

The ram, a registered Dorset ram originally from Kathy Soder's KBarK farm in Pennsylvania is out with the flock breeding the ewes to lamb in mid-April. We brought the fall lambing ewes back to the main farm before we put the ram in. If I leave them in with the ram they will get bred for spring and then we won't have many that will breed for fall. The ewes that are good at fall lambing are also easy breeders and will get bred for spring for sure.

The ewes with lambs are on second cut grass hay and a bale of SorghumxSudan (SxS) baleage. The second cut hay looks beautiful, green and soft. However, the forage analysis is not as good as it looks. The protein is about 9 percent and the TDN is about 60. The SxS baleage is surprisingly palatable but very hard to pull off the bale. The long stems tangle up and the sheep can't get the feed off the bale. Charlie has to flip it over with the tractor and we can't feed it in a feeder. We also have some oatlage we made late. It is really green and really wet and it doesn't smell like it actually fermented...might just be "refrigerated". The cows love it but we are being cautious about feeding it to the sheep because of the chance of listeriosis. Between the lack of fermentation and the soil that got baled up in the round bales there is a chance for listeriosis organisms to be present and alive in the oatlage.

I need to do a ration for them with the new sheep feed calculator I found on line. I posted a link at the www.ccenny.com website under livestock. The program doesn't balance the ration for you but it will do all the calculations for you. You can adjust feed amounts until you get it close to the requirements. The ewes could probably use a little grain but we will be weaning the lambs in a week and it makes more sense to put the grain into the lambs.

Moving the sheep from farm to farm is a challenge. It isn't too bad to catch them at the main farm as we can get them into a barn or pen and then sort and load them. They don't love to run on the trailer but at least they are all contained together. Getting them out of the open pasture is another thing altogether. When we brought back the fall lambers we had pretty good luck putting up a temporary corral with some handling system panels, gates and hog panels. We couldn't get them all in at once though. We sorted out the ones we had and took them back to the other farm and then had to start again. There were always some that hung back or bolted as they got close to the corral.

Part of the challenge is setting the corral in such a place that you can lead the sheep in and close the gates behind them without scaring them or even cluing them in that something is going on. Once they start to turn around and flow "out" it is like trying to stop water – they just keep going. Leading them works better than pushing them. Leading them with one person and another behind to hurry the stragglers can work provided they don't pop out the sides and end up on the outside of the corral. A good Border Collie can be a help but if the sheep are being obstinate it can make things worse.

A couple things that help are setting up the corral ahead of time and feeding them in there so that they get used to coming in and don't assume you are going to vaccinate them or something. A week of practice and a couple bags of whole corn are well worth the investment to relieve the frustration of

trying to move them on the spot. Having a big enough corral makes a big difference, too. If the corral is too small, the sheep will fill it up and then the last few will turn around and head out...pretty soon you only have the ones you managed to close into the gate in a rush. We'll see how it goes next week...as an additional challenge we have the giant steers to catch without hurting the sheep. They aren't exactly friendly. On the other hand the Holstein heifers are overly friendly and dangerous because they want to play with you and scratch on you. Should be interesting.

At the home farm I noticed we were going through hay much faster than I predicted. Last year I was right on so I knew we either had smaller bales or more sheep than I thought. This combination is not very good when hay is short and hard to find and not to mention expensive. After running all the sheep through the chute and writing down their numbers, vaccinating, preg checking, etc, we found we have 206 sheep! That explains why we are going through so much hay. I planned for 150-170 sheep figuring we would keep all our ewe lambs. Turns out we had an unusually high number of ewe lambs last summer and we kept most of them in our effort to expand.

Now the question is do we sell a bunch of ewe lambs to match the amount of hay we have or look for more hay. Lamb prices are not that great at the moment. We hate to sell when prices are low and then keep them when prices are higher (hopefully next year). On the other hand we need to find hay and that is a challenge. When we sorted the ewes last weekend we also graded the ewe lambs. I think we were hoping to find a bunch that we would want to sell and get us back down to reasonable numbers. However, they all look pretty good or if they are a little on the small side they were triplets. Sooo....our job is to bite the bullet and find some more feed (and hope for an early pasture season next spring!). Keeping the ewe lambs will help us meet our goal of 300 ewes sooner than we planned which will give us more income next fall.

So I need 40 more 800 pound round bales to make it to grass. Let's say they are 60 dollars apiece so that is \$2400. If I were to buy the 40 ewes I would lose by selling these ewe lambs it would cost about \$6000. Looking at it that way makes it a little easier to swallow the loss this year. Plus we know the genetics on these ewe lambs and what diseases they have and don't have. It was a challenge when we first put this flock together because we found out about sheep diseases we never had to deal with before...sort of like mixing kids at kindergarten and having them all get sick. That has all settled down so we don't want to disturb the status quo by bringing in any more new sheep.

At the Extension Learning Farm we lost our great guard dog, Bear, in November. He was a great dog. He could guard the sheep at night and then deal with busloads of Kindergarteners during the day. We are missing 4 lambs from the pasture so I think the sheep are missing him, too. We haven't decided how to replace him yet. We like to think the cattle are protecting the sheep but I am not convinced that the presence of a dog on the farm doesn't help keep the coyotes at bay even when he is not in the pasture with the sheep. It takes a special dog to deal with all the visitors we have at the Extension Farm and it is a big expense in dog food. That is a decision we will need to make in the near future because it takes a little while for a dog to get familiar with the farm and the sheep and we want to be ready at lambing time in April.

Prices were a little better last week at New Holland. Traditionally prices are higher around Christmas and then again in January and February when there aren't many lambs available. There are some lambs around to go to market in December/January so let me know if you have sheep or goats to go.

Well, the holidays are upon us and it is time to buy gifts for your people and animal friends. The sheep and goats love stale Christmas cookies, pretzels, crackers, etc. Your people friends might like those, too...but how about a pair of neoprene gloves – great for putting hoses together, cleaning out waterers

or any other wet jobs. I keep one in my pocket just for that purpose. Gather up all the pocket knives and hoof trimmers and get them sharpened. That's one of those jobs I wish someone would do. New tools like hay forks with all the tines in the right place are always appreciated. A shovel with an extra light handle is a thoughtful gift as well. You can support your industry by giving washable wool socks and gloves. I would also recommend athletic wear- like wicking turtlenecks with a zipper because they are great to wear under your barn clothes so that when you work hard and sweat you don't get chilled afterwards. A big box of foot warmers or hand warmers is always appreciated as well – especially by those “volunteer” family members that get pressed into action over the holidays.

Presents or no presents, remember the barn is a great place to escape the bustle of the holidays. Listening to the sheep or goats eating hay in a freshly bedded barn or even outside around the round bales on a moonlit night can be very therapeutic. You can't take a picture of it. You have to be there so stop a moment and enjoy!