100% crop actually loses money

State lamb crop percentage continues to drop

COCHRANVILLE — It will be lambing time soon for Pennsylvania's sheep producers. For most it means cold nights in the barn and sometimes extraordinary efforts to save the lives of newborn lambs. With the birth of the new crop comes the expectation of profits for the year to come.

Unfortunately the income picture for Pennsylvania's sheep farmers is bleak unless a dramatic improvement occurs in the lamb crop.

Since 1974 the number of lambs born alive and saved per ewe has steadily declined in Pennsylvania according to the Pennsylvania Crop Reporting Service. The 1974 lamb crop was 107 percent. In each successive year it has declined by one percent, dropping to 102 percent in 1979. Figures for 1980 will be released in January.

Actually the 1974 crop of 107 percent was a ten year high with lamb crops between 1970 and 1973 vacillating between 98 percent and 103 percent.

For the sheep flock to be profitable, lamb crops of 150 percent to 175 percent are necessary.

In a recent study done at Purdue University, David C. Petritz reported that a sheep farmer with a 100 ewe flock and a lamb crop of 100 percent would show a loss of $1648 per year if he marketed his lambs at $65 per cwt.

With a 150 percent lamb crop he would make a profit of $9.50.

At 175 percent his profit would increase to $838.25 and reach $1667 with a 200 percent lamb crop.

Ewes have the potential to produce lamb crops approaching 200 percent, however neo-natal losses and infertility of the ewe cause devastating losses to the producer. Occasionally infertility affects as many as 20 percent of the ewes in the flock.

There is no accurate report on infertility in Pennsylvania's flocks, but W. Duane Mickelsen found sheep producers in Washington State were accustomed to an annual loss from infertility of five percent to 20 percent.

Observations of some flocks in Pennsylvania indicate that infertility varies greatly from year to year, with an individual flock occasionally having as few as 3 percent barren ewes and as high as 20 percent in another year.

Many Pennsylvania sheep producers would like to have the School of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Pennsylvania study this problem. They hope the school will someday soon have an ovine specialist to concentrate on sheep health problems, but Dr. Robert Marshak, Dean of the Veterinary School, says there are no funds available to aid the sheep industry.

While reproductive science in other livestock species has grown technologically to include artificial insemination and embryo transplants, the sheep industry is left groping in the dark ages of reproductive science.

Neither AI nor embryo transplants have been perfected for sheep in this country. Nor has any degree of sophistication in diagnosing reproductive track illnesses in the ovine species been developed.

Essential to successful clinical diagnosis of animal reproductive problems is the ability of the practitioner to diagnose pregnancy. Two methods are commonly used for early pregnancy detection in sheep, the rod method and the ultra-sonic device.

The rod costs less than two dollars but takes considerable skill and practice to use accurately plus extensive labor.

The sonic detectors range in price from $250 to $1000. With the ultra-sonic instrument, the sheep does not have to be upended or cradled as with the rod. When the sonic probe is place in the correct position a red light flashes if the ewe is open, a green light if she is pregnant.

Pennsylvania's only veterinary school has a large department of reproductive medicine Only a few of its faculty have made an effort to learn pregnancy diagnosis with the rod. Requests to purchase a sonic device have been denied. Yet it seems logical to sheep producers that every veterinarian who will be going out into the field to practice large animal medicine should be skilled in ovine pregnancy detection

Good management in the lambing barn can help increase the lamb crop, and Clair Engle of Penn State's Extension Service has been doing yeoman service in teaching management skills to Pennsylvania's sheep producers.

However, even in the best managed flocks reproductive problems and infertility abound

For more information on the efforts of sheep producers to improve ovine medicine services in Pennsylvania, contact Annette Menhennett, RD #1, Cochranville, Pa. 19330, telephone 215/593-5726.

Clinton Co. beef

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bunks were kept intact to final finish cattle before sending them to market.

Last fall the Master Farmer built another barn which has features to cut down on labor, including improved ventilation and more slope to the floors. A manure pit, located near the two barns, holds over a million gallons.

"It would not be a big task to pipe animal wastes into a digester for a methane generator but I can't see any financial advantages to generating my own electricity at this time," Dotterer notes.

The Master Farmer was a pioneer with his feeding program as well as barn design. His farm was the first in the country to use cold-flow anhydrous ammonia in feed to increase protein content.

The ammonia gas passes through a jet and, when lowered to minus 28 degrees Farenheit, is liquid. The Penn State College of Agriculture used his farm to test this feeding program and he has been using it since on corn silage and high moisture corn

Dotterer feeds alfalfa silage at 60 percent moisture in addition to high moisture ear corn. All feed is stored in trenches. He uses an industrial loader to remove the silage from the trench and place it in feed bunks.

Always conscious of energy, the beef cattleman planted 800 acres of corn by the no-till method this past year. He also plants 300 acres of corn for silage and another 300 acres for high moisture corn. Still another 200 acres of corn are sold as a cash crop.

"I grow 150 acres of alfalfa and have 130 acres of pasture. Most of the alfalfa goes into haylage but I do bale some hay to feed the new cattle," he emphasizes.

Dotterer was credited with over seven tons of alfalfa per acre in 1978 and 1979 while winning awards in the Pennsylvania Alfalfa Growers Program.

Recognizing the advantages of hybrid vigor, the Clinton County farmer prefers to buy crossbred cattle. He likes crosses with Angus, Charolais, Simmental, or Limousin beef breeds. The demand now is for larger crosses, he notes.

The Dotterer farm dates back to 1825 and the Master Farmer is the sixth generation to operate it. "My sons will stay here, too," he says.

Charles graduated from Gettysburg College and is a partner in the operation. Ralph, Jr., has built a new house on the farm and shares in the management.

Ralph, Sr., a Penn State graduate, and Mrs. Dotterer, a home economics teacher, have hosted foreign exchange students and have visited exchange student families abroad.

In addition to spending full time operation the beef cattle farm, the Master Farmer is active in his church and community.

Currently he is president of the Pennsylvania Beef Council and has held offices in the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association and Clinton County Farmers' Association. The 1979 Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Field Day was held on the Dotterer farm.

He also is a two-time winner of the Outstanding Grassland Farmer Award presented by the Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council.

Dotterer is a member of the United Church of Christ and belongs to various Masonic groups and Kiwanis.