

Lights Shine Way To Improved Fall Lambing

DES MOINES, Iowa — Sheep may produce a more even flow of lambs to market by keeping the same hours as Jay Leno and David Letterman, according to South Dakota research.

The traditional image of lambs gamboling in the spring sunshine presents a unique challenge to the sheep industry, noted South Dakota State University Sheep Researcher Lowell Slyter. He noted that most lambs are born in the spring, making the supply of lamb to market subject to seasonal cycles.

"Sheep rely on a number of en-

vironmental cues including day length to trigger reproductive behavior. That means they are seasonal breeders and that puts most of our product on the market at a specific time of the year," he said.

Researchers have tried for years to override those environmental cues with hormones and other treatments, but have been stymied by unacceptably low reproductive rates and the unavailability of acceptable hormone products.

Slyter and his colleagues decided that perhaps the best way to trigger reproductive behavior was as simple as flipping a light

switch. Researchers kept lights on in sheep pens until 1 a.m. in December and January, then exposed the sheep only to natural daylight beginning in February.

"That switch from long days to short days triggered breeding behavior that typically occurs naturally in the fall," Slyter said. About 84 percent of the ewe lambs exposed to the light treatment became pregnant in the latest year of Slyter's study. That compares to only 57 percent of sheep that were exposed to natural light only. "That 84 percent pregnancy rate for ewe lambs is very good even for a spring lambing season," Slyter said.

Ewes exposed to the light treatment also gained more weight and were heavier at breeding, a factor that may also contribute to the success of the program. Slyter said, noting that a heavier weight at breeding is correlated with a higher lambing rate.

"We also saw an average of 1.36 lambs born to treated ewes compared to only 1.2 lambs for

untreated sheep," Slyter said. "That tells us that the treated sheep are also having a higher ovulation rate. Typically, we'd expect a lower ovulation rate than that for sheep producing fall lambs."

Slyter noted that producers must use all of the management techniques that they would use in a successful spring lambing system to make the most of this fall lambing system.

"This system should be easy for producers to implement, but a key will be to develop a schedule and stick to it," he said.

Graduate student Dana Hanson presented the results of the research to more than 1,000 researchers, extension specialists, and industry representatives at the

recent joint Midwest meeting of the American Society of Animal Science and the American Dairy Science Association in Des Moines.

Slyter said the fall lambing system holds other benefits as well. He notes that sheep can be bred at a younger age. That means any animals that don't become pregnant can be sold as market lambs rather than as lower priced cull sheep.

Additional research is planned to fine-tune the system. Slyter says researchers also are looking at other factors that could improve fall lambing systems. "We're also studying genetics. We should be able to select breeding stock for improved fall lambing," he said.

To Farmland Protection Board

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — On behalf of Gov. Tom Ridge, Agriculture Secretary Charles C. Brosius announced the appointment of G. Warren Elliott of Chambersburg, Franklin County, to the Pennsylvania Agricultural Land Preservation Board.

The board is responsible for oversight of the state Farmland Protection Program.

"Mr. Elliott's understanding of local government and the community, combined with his interest in preservation, will be valuable as he serves on the board," Brosius said.

Gov. Ridge appointed Elliott to a four-year term that will end in April 2000.

Elliott, 41, was appointed to the Franklin County Board of Commissioners in 1987. He was

elected to the position in 1995 and serves as chairman.

He also serves as director of the Franklin County Conservation District and the Franklin County Area Development Corporation. He is a member of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and Franklin County Heritage.

Elliott has served as assistant executive director of South Central Community Action Programs, Inc., a \$2.5 million nonprofit corporation serving Franklin and Adams counties.

From 1989 to 1993, Elliott taught state and local government at Shippensburg University.

For 15 years, Elliott has been a regional representative with General Code Publishers, a leading municipal legal publisher.

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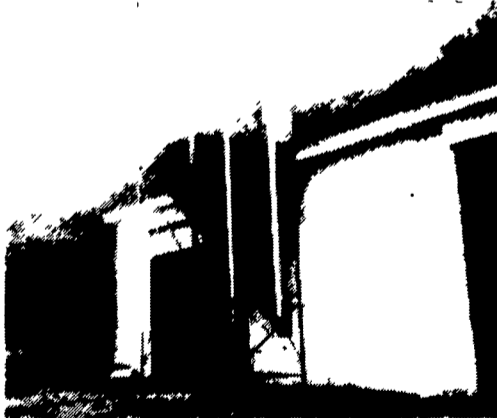
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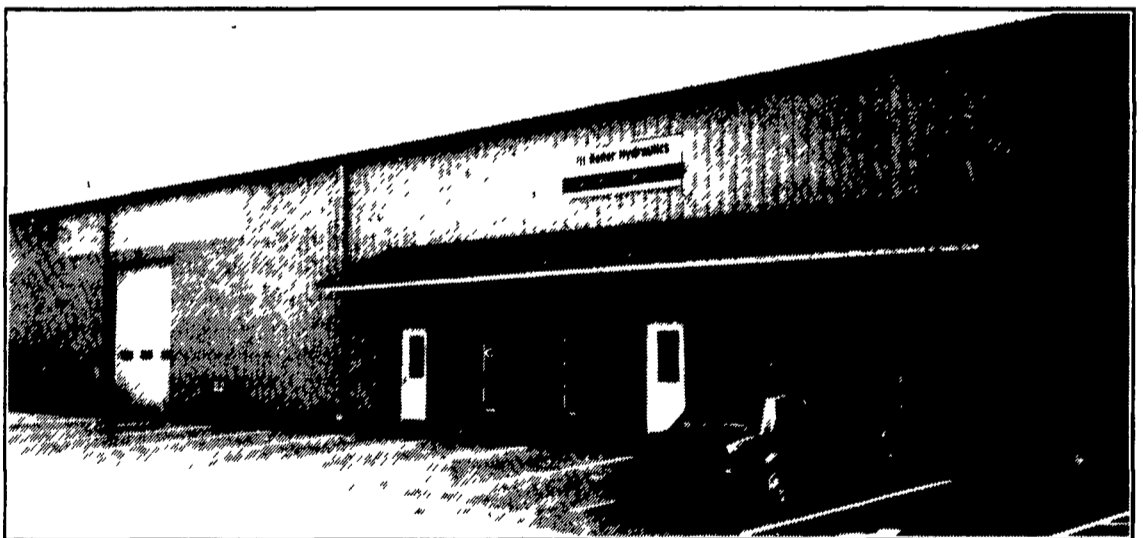
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