

More commercial flocks advocated

SHEEP

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bly something greater than 75 lambs," he said.

Marketing lambs as one large lot has its advantages, he said. Last year the Leder farm sold 135 lambs averaging 83.4 pounds for 78 cents a pound, or a total of \$64 per lamb. The double-deck trailer load returned a gross of \$8,640.

Records for the past three years are equally noteworthy. In 1998, the Leders sold 91 lambs averaging 78.2 pounds for an average of \$58.68. In 1997, 122 lambs weighing an average of 82.1 pounds sold for \$74.04 each. In 1996, 112 lambs averaged 82 pounds and sold for an average of \$68.27.

The crop of feeder lambs is sold after four months to a southern Wisconsin buyer who puts another 40 or 50 pounds of weight on the lambs before they are marketed.

"A high-demand feeder lamb is at least one-half 'rate-of-gain' sire, and by virtue of the needs of the flock has some prolificacy and high lactation background," he said.

Although Dr. Leder spent a year in Idaho working with sheep after graduating from the University of Minnesota School of Veterinary Medicine, he and his wife didn't begin to raise sheep until they moved to Waupaca County in 1985. The Leders met while attending the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

"We needed something the kids and I could handle," said Mrs. Leder, a UW-River Falls animal science graduate. She also took an advanced sheep management course under the tutelage of farm manager Rudy Erickson.

The Leders are the parents of Heidi, a student at UW-River Falls, and Casey, who will attend UW-Madison next year after graduating from Clintonville High School.

At their 60-acre farm, the Leders developed a starter flock based on bloodlines from sheep that Dr. Leder's brother, Mark, owned. Those were descendants of sheep Dr. Leder originally sold to his brother when he went off to school.

With some of the farm classified as highly erodible, their sheep enjoy the benefits of intensive rotation grazing.

"We want to maximize the productivity of the ewe. She will raise lambs for about four months and we have to care for her for 12 months," Dr. Leder said.

Last year 82 ewes produced 170 live lambs. With about 80 ewes preparing to lamb in sheds this month, the Leders have separated out about 10 ewes that are carrying triplets or quads. They don't want injuries as ewes gather around the hay feeder.

When selecting breeds for

fecundity, the Leders introduced the Booroola gene, identified by an Australian breeder. They imported semen for the Booroola gene but don't use AI now.

"A good hunch is they are carrying the Booroola gene if they have triplets or twins," Mrs. Leder said. "We identify carriers just by production."

Over the years the Leders have settled on a crossbred with Hampshire and Oxford bloodlines and the Booroola gene.

"We noticed white-faced sheep were the ones out grazing and not affected by the heat," Mrs. Leder said.

Although other breed combinations work, Dr. Leder finds East

Friesian and Dorset cross rams are a key to prolific, good-milking ewes. Another successful combination would be an East Friesian and Finn ram with black-faced ewes, he said.

Even with triplets and quads common, the Leders select for ewes that are good mothers and have high milk production.

"We believe a ewe can rear a set of triplets successfully on well-managed pasture without the hassles and expense of

grain," he said.

"We want to milk Friesian sheep only we don't want to do the milking. We want them to milk a lot so we raise triplets.

"Our theory is if we spend extra time in the lambing barn to make sure that the set of triplets is bonded equally, then that ewe can be milked by the three lambs all summer long. With three lambs on the ewe, she definitely is going to milk as much as she can."

The sheep industry is also benefiting from Dr. Leder's interest in animal health; he chaired the state's scrapie task force, which worked to develop a program to deal with the disease.

"It's a whole industry issue," he said. "We have to understand if we are going to control this thing it will impact each and every producer in some way. The big issue is traceback of involved animals. Right now we don't have that."

About 10 years ago, Dr. Leder helped organize the Ovine Progressive Pneumonia Concerned Sheep Breeders Society, a national group dedicated to education about the viral disease.

The Leders say they are always thinking of how to improve production practices, and seek to avoid problems if possible.

"We enjoy sheep farming more than sheep," Dr. Leder said. "It's the system that counts."

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— Dr. Robert Leder, sheep producer

