

# Resources the Foundation for Successful Wisconsin Sheep Operation

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Match your production system to your resources.

It's a philosophy that Wisconsin sheep producers Bob and Penny Leder have had success with, and they think others can as well.

"I think there has been a lot of focus on ewe productivity," Leder explains. "There has not been enough focus on matching our system to our resources."

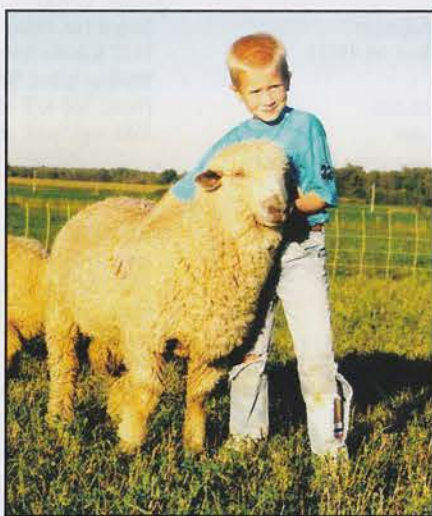
Leder, a veterinarian and sheep producer from Bear Creek, Wis., has been able to balance his genetic choices, management and resources into a profitable Midwest sheep operation, running 90 ewes on his 80 acre farm. The Leders have been able to implement management strategies that revolve around their resources, instead of fitting resources around production.

"One of my favorite things to do is just walk out to the sheep on pasture and watch a ewe graze with her lambs and just relax and enjoy how our system is in tune with our resources," he relates.

Leder began his sheep enterprise when he was in 4-H, building a small flock of 10 Oxford ewes. He sold this flock when he went to college but bought them back in 1988 and began to use the resource that is fairly abundant in the Midwest - grass.

"I started a grass-based sheep enterprise because I figured sheep are much more profitable than cattle and easier to get into," he relates.

He was able to build up his flock by re-



A picture from 1989, the half Booroola Merino half Oxford ram that was the foundation of Leder's flock with son Casey.

taining as many replacement ewes as possible while focusing on what system best fit his labor resources and the forage available to his flock.

"We certainly could have more sheep based on our forage base, but it works with the system that we have now," Leder says.

The growing season, pastures and market season have all shaped the Leders' production system in many ways over the years.

Very importantly, he points out, he eliminated OPP

from his flock early on, thus avoiding the economic hardships that go along with that disease.

He started the flock with Oxfords and introduced the Booroola F+ gene through artificial insemination to increase prolificacy, and kept one ram from this breeding. The Leders expanded their ewe flock with Hampshires and Oxford/white-face cross ewes and bred all to the ram, keeping all the ewe lambs for replacement ewes.

As they realized that the black-face ewes did not cope as well in the heat as the "speckled face" ewes, they chose to go to crossbreds, adding the Corriedale breed to their system.

They next added Dorset genetics into the flock, as the extra lambs caused by the Booroola F+ gene required a heavier milk production and mothering ability. When the East Friesian breed, a dairy sheep breed, became available, an East Friesian/Dorset cross ram was used on the ewe flock. Leder still crossed his ewes back to Hampshire rams for meat and does keep some resulting ewe lambs as they can be carriers of the Booroola gene.

Recently, Leder introduced a South African Meat Merino ram for meat and growth.

"We are really big believers in heterosis and cross breeding. We used the Dorset for mothering, the East Friesian for milk, the black faces for growth and the Booroola F+ gene for prolificacy," he says.

What has resulted from this breeding system is an average of two 70-pound lambs per ewe at weaning that have the frame to finish at 120-140 pounds.

A majority of these lambs are sold as feeder lambs in the fall, after spending the summer in Leder's low-cost, grass-based intensive grazing system. Leder also has sold



The growing season, pastures and market season have all shaped the Leders' production system in many ways over the years. Above is a yearling half South African Meat Merino ewe with her twin lambs in 2009.

some ewes into commercial flocks.

The ewes are shed lambed in April and turned out to grass the first of May. They have the summer of grazing until the grass starts to go in late July and early August when Leder starts looking at markets.

"By the nature of my work, I am busy in the winter and don't want to feed out lambs then. The flock shrinks considerably in the fall and the work dissipates. I really try to fit the flock and system into our lifestyle," Leder says, adding that both he and Penny are integral to the labor and management of the flock.

When it comes to marketing, Leder says that he has found looking at the markets that will bring the best price has been successful instead of just settling on one.

"I don't consider myself a marketing wizard, but I am also willing to market on my own," he says, adding that he will go to who can give him the best return, often leaving and returning to buyers over the years.

"I am kind of willing to talk to anyone who is interested in local lamb at a fair price," he adds.

The biggest cost to the operation, says Leder, is buying grain to feed ewes at the end of gestation and lambing, about 100 pounds per ewe every year. Other than this, the sys-

tem relies on the grass and hay production of his farm.

According to Leder, the economics are positive enough, especially in forage-dense regions, that there is significant incentive to start raising sheep.

"I just wish the industry would grow. I try to help the industry to get people to think about doing it their own way that matches their own resources. I think there is a huge amount of opportunity and resources in the Midwest to grow."

He actively speaks to sheep groups and other interested parties in his region to look into starting sheep operations, or if already producing sheep, to consider expanding their flock.

"A stumbling block is that people need to have more sheep so they can have larger lots to market. It's easier to sell large lots of lambs as opposed to 10 or 12," he relates.

While not every producer across the United States has the same resource base as Leder, or have more or less sheep, he emphasizes that they can still match their systems to what resources they do have. While ultimately producers feel they need to market as many lambs as possible, Leder suggests looking at what resources they have before changing their system. If they increase lamb production per year, can they handle the feed costs for the ewes, do they have the time to handle more lambs and do they have the feed to support those animals before they go to market? For every piece of the puzzle they don't have within their own resources, there is a cost associated with the potential to reduce the profit for the producer.

Overall, Leder feels it's not about what others do, it's about what is most efficient and economically viable for each operation.

"I just plain like looking at my sheep. I don't need someone else to say it's a blue ribbon sheep. I don't care what breed they are - if they work, that's what motivates me. I don't lose money on my sheep. I make money."

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