

Working with an Automatic Lamb Feeder

By Courtney Denard

Investment in technological innovation is one means for sheep producers to help ensure the long-term sustainability of their business and contribute to the longevity of the industry. It isn't necessarily the technology itself, but rather the impact it can have on managing labour, time and financial resources as well as increasing production volume and efficiency. The Automatic Lamb Feeder is one such innovation that is making a difference for some Canadian shepherds. Producers place milk powder into the machine where it is mixed with warm water and heated to 40°C before it is released to hungry lambs. The machine is equipped with six nipples that provide fresh warm milk for up to 120 lambs 24/7 and can be assembled in any sheep barn in about 20 minutes. Developed 15 years ago by Foerster Technik, a German-based company, this easy-to-use technology is widely distributed in Canada by Grober Nutrition Inc., retailing at \$4,995.00 plus GST.

In an industry where labour is hard to come by and even harder to keep, getting all the necessary work done can be difficult on the best of days. For sheep producers, this is especially true during lambing. Multiple births, which happen more often than not, can lead to hours and hours of bottle or pail feeding lambs which were either orphaned by their mother, or are not pushy enough to get to the front of the line. The reality is the average producer is crunched for time, so two to three bottle feedings per day is about the norm. Unfortunately, this may not be enough to keep mortality rates down, or to produce consistent quality lambs.

The Automatic Lamb Feeder is a production tool that can help sheep producers who are struggling with high lamb orphan rates. The benefits of this machine are plenty, making the cost of almost \$5,000.00 a little bit easier to swallow.

For example:

- Producers who have adopted the Automatic Lamb Feeder indicate their lamb mortality rates have dropped. Scours and bloat are also reduced as lambs can drink from the machine when they feel like it, instead of gorging themselves during the typical routine of two to three feedings per day.
- Training lambs is easier to do because of the constant supply of warm milk.
- Daily gains are increased as lambs can drink multiple times per day, therefore absorbing the milk in their stomachs at a slower rate.
- Reliance on labour becomes a non-issue as lambs can drink from the machine as often as they choose whether the producer is in or out of the barn. As well, managing the machine takes approximately one hour per day – a big difference from the average five to six hours (or more) that can be spent bottle or pail feeding.
- The machine is built with an internal pressure tube that sends out a signal when more milk is needed to be made.



Jan Ziemerink, Automation Services Manager at Grober Nutrition Inc., has worked with the Automatic Lamb Feeder since the early 1990s. Grober recognized the value of this machine as a production tool and was instrumental in the development and launch of the machine in Canada. Over the past 17 years, Ziemerink has seen the lamb feeder do some great things on sheep farms across Canada, but as is with any technology, he has also seen the challenges. Ziemerink says that the biggest challenge goes back to proper management, which is essential to ensure producers get the longest life span out of the feeder as possible. But maintaining the technology is not onerous. “The machine has to be kept clean and drained when it is not in use, and must never be allowed to freeze during the winter months,” he says.

Bill McCutcheon, an Ontario sheep producer who has owned an Automatic Lamb Feeder since 1994, agrees, but goes one step further in saying, “You also have to have rodent control. Do not keep the lines on the floor because mice will certainly chew on them.” McCutcheon faced another challenge in learning the proper way to wean the lambs. “The first time we weaned we just let the powder run out,” he says. “But the sheep just drank all the water and urinated all over the pens.” Now, McCutcheon has set up a system where weaning lambs drink the milk from long hoses, making it harder for them to consume. The sheep get tired and turn to feed instead.

According to Ziemerink, one of the key success factors when adopting the Automatic Lamb Feeder is to do your homework first. “Do your research beforehand and make sure you have the right facility. The right pen set-up is important to the success of the machine,” says Ziemerink.

For McCutcheon, he says that it really was a “learn as you go” type situation, however, Grober offers 24-hour technical support as well as information and videos on the website that were helpful.

Through Grober’s experience with the Automatic Lamb Feeder, Ziemerink has come to see how helpful and open producers are in the Canadian sheep industry. Ziemerink says some of the best suggestions he gets about the machine are from the producers already using the technology. Traveling to farms all across Canada, as well as exhibiting at farm shows, Grober has had the opportunity to talk to many sheep producers about their experiences. “Nobody is afraid to help each other out,” Ziemerink says. “At the end of the day everyone wants to make a better product so you get a better market price.” McCutcheon’s ultimate learning experience was recognizing just how much time can be saved using the machine. “For us, the biggest thing was labour,” he says. “With this machine, you do not have to mix milk and when you have up to 65 lambs born at once, it saves a tonne of time that we can devote to other tasks on the farm – in the end making a better and more sustainable operation.”

For more information on Grober or the Automatic Lamb Feeder visit Grober's website at www.grobernutrition.com or call 1-800-265-7863 x: 210.