

Types of Sheep Farms

The type of sheep farm you choose to operate will largely be determined by the resources available to you (land base, housing, etc.) and by the type of reproductive management system you are interested in developing. The basic types of sheep farming in Ontario are briefly explained below.

1. Farm Flock:

This is the most common type of sheep farm in Ontario. Farm flocks combine pasture grazing for part of the year and indoor or corral housing for the winter. For example, ewes and lambs may be left on pasture until weaning when lambs are moved to feedlot pens for feeding until they are ready for market. Housing requirements for this type of system will vary with the reproductive management system. A wide variety of barns are used for winter housing of ewes including open sided sheds, pole barns, hip barns etc. Generally some type of insulated lambing facility will also be needed, depending when lambing will occur. For producers planning on building a new facility, there are plans available from OMAFRA detailing various types of sheep barns.

2. Pasture-Based:

This type of operation is more common in the Prairies than Ontario. This type of operation generally involves a large flock, requiring a large land base. The system involves spring lambing, pasturing throughout the summer, fall marketing of lambs either as finished lambs or feeders, late fall breeding of ewes, and wintering on pasture with appropriate shelter provided. The main advantages to this system are the low costs involved and given the right circumstances, can be very economical. The buildings, if any, are simple and the sheep graze all year, with supplemental feeding provided in the winter. Drawbacks to this system include the vulnerability of the sheep to predation by animals such as coyotes, wolves, and dogs. Weather in spring can be harmful to new lambs and losses can be high if shelter is minimal.

3. Total Confinement:

As the name suggests, both ewes and lambs are kept in pens year-round and require year-round feeding. Three-sided barns with pens extending to the outside are frequently used with this system. Advantages of intensive management systems are that they do not require a large land base, and fencing costs and predation losses are low. However, feed costs are generally much higher, animal health can be a problem if management is less than excellent, and more labour is generally required. This type of system is not overly common in Ontario and would be found most often with intensively managed accelerated lambing programs and feedlots. A rare variation of total confinement system is controlled environment housing, which is similar to large poultry or swine operations. Producers wishing to manipulate the ewe's breeding cycle using light control may use this system.

4. Feedlot Lamb Production:

Feedlot operators purchase lambs that have not yet reached the weight at which they will be slaughtered and finish them on high-energy diets. With a relatively low average market weight, this type of operation is relatively uncommon in Ontario, as most sheep breeders hold their lambs until they are market weight. Lamb feedlots are more common in Western Canada, however, and the trend may eventually extend east. Depending on how large of an operation you are considering, feedlots can offer the flexibility of involvement in the sheep industry without having to commit the overhead and time necessary for maintaining a breeding flock.

5. Dairy Production:

Dairy sheep production is relatively new to Ontario, but is well established in other parts of the world. Currently there are a growing number of dairy producers in Ontario. Dairy sheep producers market both lambs and dairy products, with milk being processed into such products as cheese, yoghurt and ice cream. Operating a dairy flock requires specialized equipment, facilities, and the requirement of attending to

milking daily during the season. Depending on your marketing arrangements, the extra overhead and time required may be offset by greater income stability compared to strictly producing market lambs. Contact the Ontario Dairy Sheep Association for details.

Wool Production

With the exception of 'hair' sheep, all breeds produce wool and need to be shorn yearly. Wool prices in Canada have been low for a number of years. Generally, prices paid have not been sufficient to cover the cost of shearing. When world stocks of wool decrease, there may be an increase in price. As well, certain breeds of sheep produce wool that is valuable in specialty and niche markets. Depending of the resourcefulness of the shepherd, value added wool products can add substantially to the farm income. However, wool production is not often the primary reason for keeping sheep in Ontario.