

MAKING THE MOST OF LAMB MARKETING

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As we look back at 2009, lamb (and goat) prices were certainly the bright spot in the livestock industry. We saw some upper \$90's during the summer and spent the rest of the year over \$100/cwt. Compare this to: slaughter cattle prices in the low to mid \$80's and feedlots losing \$100-200 per head at times; hog prices in the \$30's most of the summer (they are now around \$48); milk prices below production costs for most of the year which forced many producers out of business and others deep in debt. So let's be thankful that we have a product that is in demand in these economic times. Lamb production is at historic lows and it is a simple supply – demand situation that producers are on the good side of. What is driving this demand? Many of the Ethnic (people from different cultures around the world who move here) are lamb and goat eaters. They are the first and second generation to live here and they bring their culture with them. Eating lamb and goat is a high priority for them and they will sacrifice in other areas of living if they need to. Other ethnics who have been here for 3-4-5 generations get Americanized and eat more like the natives. Their kids get to know our kids, go to school together, and begin to take on more of our tendencies. Can you imagine the curious looks someone gets if they buy a lamb or goat at the market, put it in the back seat or trunk of their car, and drive off? How many generations will continue to do this?

There were two periods of peak prices, the highest coming in February-March when lamb numbers were extremely low. Many butcher shops were losing money on lamb, but paid the high prices (up to \$180/cwt) for a short while just to keep some lamb in the meat case. The high prices also caused some cuts to be sold rather than the whole carcass. The second peak came in November-December. Eid-ul-Adha (Eid) is the highest demand holiday for those who follow Islam. In November at special sales here in Virginia, 90-110 pound lambs brought \$111-133/cwt with a few up to \$140. 70-90 pound lambs brought \$120-144, with a top of \$156 paid for a group of ram lambs (with tails and horns) at Madison. Prices were the same here in Virginia as they were in New Holland. Prices in New Holland were actually higher the Monday after Eid. Why? November 23rd there were 7,000 lambs and goats for sale. November 30th there were 1,000 – not enough to supply normal market channels. We have seen this trend as more people target the 1-2 week window before big holidays and this leaves a large void in numbers after the holiday. We also saw this at Christmas. Monitor these changes as opportunists will react.

So rather than making the best of a bad situation, how do we make the most of good prices?

1. Get Informants.

Find someone knowledgeable about the market place and find out what may be the best time or times to sell what you have. They could be a trucker, livestock market operator, VDACS personnel, other producers, order buyers, butchers, or your neighbor – particularly if they are part of the Ethnic community. Hispanics, Muslims, Jamaicans, Africans, Ethiopians, Poles, other eastern Europeans, Middle Easterners – almost any recent immigrants may be a potential customer.

2. Know the peak demand and low supply periods.

See the Ethnic Holiday Calendar for important dates. Notice that the Muslim holidays get 10 days earlier each year. Eid-ul-Adha offers the highest demand from the Muslim community. Not all holidays cause an increase in demand. The Jewish holidays in September may cause lower prices because the slaughter plants may be closed for 2-3 days per week for 3-4 weeks. For the foreseeable future, we will have low numbers in the February-March period, which should translate into higher prices. As more opportunists realize this, it may change. Consider fall lambing – work the prices into your production systems and feed supply situations. It may still be profitable with higher production costs. Fall born club lambs are in short supply.

3. Know what is in demand for the different holidays.

Hothouse lambs for Christmas and Easter need to be young, milk-fed, and look fresh when they enter the sale ring. Because of this, some buyers want them as close to the holiday as possible. Greek Easter wants a 50-60 pound lamb. Eid is definitely a good time to sell cull ewes and rams. The most desired weight of lambs for Eid is 90-120 pounds. Some of the lighter lambs sold this past November actually went on feed. When you look at most of the year, the highest returns per head are for the heavier lambs.

4. Identify your wether and ram lambs.

Certain buyers have a year-round preference for male lambs and are willing to pay more for them. At special sales in November, the highest prices were for the ram lambs. Groups of wethers were next and \$10-20 more than ewe lambs. At one sale a group of mixed ewe and wether lambs were the cheapest of any group – the buyers who wanted only male lambs would not bid on them. Identify by tagging in different ears, ear notching, or some other system that works for you.

5. Properly manage tails and intact males.

If you choose to leave tails on, you will need to control parasites so they don't get messy rear ends – which can lead to price discounts. If ram lambs become sexually active and you separate them from the ewe lambs, keep them at a distance, not in the adjoining field. One producer monitored weight on a group of ram lambs pastured next to a group of ewe lambs. They rams didn't gain because they spent a lot of time walking the fence.

If you send lambs to New Holland you will need more than an informant. You will need someone to look after the animals, to ensure they get hay and water to minimize weight loss. Someone who knows the best time to get them there. I wouldn't recommend just sending them without making some arrangements and phone calls.

I have mentioned a couple of times how conditions have changed. They will continue to change. That's why it's important to stay connected and don't assume that this year will be like the last. A small amount of research can pay big dividends.

Ethnic Holiday Calendar 2008-2012

Holiday	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
* Eid ul-Adha Festival of Sacrifice	December 9	November 27	November 16	November 6	October 25
Muharram/ Islamic New Year	December 29	December 18	December 7	November 26	November 15
Mawlid al-Nabi Prophet's Birthday	March 20	March 9	March 20	February 15	February 4
Start of Ramadan Month of Fasting	September 2	August 22	August 11	August 1	July 20
* Eid ul-Fitr Festival of Fast Breaking	October 2	September 20	September 10	August 31	August 19
Passover/Pesach	April 20- 27	April 9-16	March 30- April 6	April 19- 26	April 7-14
Rosh Hashanah	September 30	September 19-20	September 9-10	September 29-30	September 17-18
Chanukkah	December 22-29	December 12-19	December 2-9	December 21-28	December 9-16
Western Roman Easter	March 23	April 12	April 4	April 24	April 8
Eastern Orthodox Easter	April 27	April 19	April 4	April 24	April 15
Christmas	December 25				

Source of dates: Interfaith Calendar

Explanation of Holidays

Muslim Holidays

Ramadan is the ninth month of the year in the Islamic calendar. A fast, held from sunrise to sunset, is carried out during this period.

Eid-al-Fitr is a festival that ends the fast of Ramadan. In Arabic "Eid" means "festival" or "festivity."

Eid-al-Adha is second in the series of Eid festivals that Muslims celebrate. It concludes the Hajj and is a three-day festival recalling Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to Allah (God).

Muharram is the first month for the Muslim year. Its first day is celebrated as New Year's Day.

Mawlid al-Nabi is a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

While the two Eid Festivals are always on the same day of the Islamic calendar, the date on the Western calendar (the Gregorian calendar) varies from year to year due to differences between the two calendars, as the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar and the Gregorian calendar is a solar calendar. Furthermore, the method used to determine when each Islamic month begins varies from country to country. Future dates listed are only estimates.

Jewish Holidays

Passover is a holiday beginning on the 14th of Nisan (first month of the religious calendar, corresponding to March–April) and traditionally continuing for eight days, commemorating the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. Also called *Pesach*.

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. It is marked by solemnity as well as festivity.

Chanukkah is the Jewish festival of rededication, also known as the festival of lights. It is an eight day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev.

Jewish holidays are celebrated on the same day of the Jewish calendar every year, but the Jewish year is not the same length as a solar year on the Gregorian calendar used by most of the western world, so the date shifts on the Gregorian calendar.

Christian Holidays

Easter is a Christian feast commemorating the Resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion. The Orthodox Eastern Church calculates Easter somewhat differently, so that the Orthodox Easter usually comes several weeks after that of the West.

Eastern Orthodox Christians come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Greek, Russian, Egyptian, Romanian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Georgian, Albanian, Ethiopian, Syrian, and American.

Recommended Links

www.timeanddate.com

www.sheepgoatmarketing.info

[Interfaith Calendar](#)

[What is Your Religion . . . If Any?](#)

Last updated 13-Nov-2008 by [Susan Schoenian](#).

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