Trends in the Idaho Sheep Ranching Industry

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At one time the Union Pacific Stockyards at Sun Valley-Ketchem shipped more sheep and lambs than any point except Sidney, Australia. Only occasionally now do the beautiful hills surrounding Sun Valley hear the distant sound of sheep bells or bleating lambs. Compared with those early years, the sheep are almost gone. The gravelly sediments along the Wood River held the posts and rails of the stockyards. They now support the rail fences and wooden shake roofs of the homes and condominiums of the nation’s wealthiest citizens.

The range sheep industry of southern Idaho has followed the national trend of decreasing numbers. However, unique features of the traditional Idaho production system have caused it to be even more susceptible to economic events which have unfolded since 1970. Nearly 70 percent of all Idaho lands belong to the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. An informal study in 1970 indicated that the typical Idaho sheep producer had invested over twice as much in federal grazing permits as in private lands. The highly productive desert, foothill, and mountain public pastures combined with fertile, irrigated farm lands in the river valleys produced a system of intensive confined lambing.

Historically, range sheep in southern Idaho depended upon abundant supplies of alfalfa hay and grain. High production ewes were bred to some of the finest Suffolk rams in America. After confinement lambing in late December or January, the ewes and lambs moved to tender green range forage in mid-March, April, or early May. They followed the quality vegetation, sometimes great distances, to the mountains for summer grazing. Lambs were sent to market from the high country in late July, August, or September, with a large percentage going directly to slaughter. In other parts of the West, lambing occurs on the ranges and sheep may see only limited winter supplementation. In southern Idaho, both expensive feed and labor are required. Shed lambing demands constant care 24 hours a day for lambs and ewes, with a heavy feeding regime to support milk production for twins. Lambs are born in “drop corrals,” then moved into huge canvas covered sheds with individual pens for each ewe and lamb. “Grafting” switches new born lambs to match the ewe’s milk supply with twin or single lambs. Animals are closely watched for health problems and mixed into increasingly larger groups. Finally, bands of 800 to 1,000 ewes plus lambs are made up for the trip to the summer ranges. This costly system produced the highest lamb crop per ewe and some of the heaviest off range market weights in the nation.

Idaho sheep producers were the most productive and in many ways most progressive in the country. However, they were uniquely vulnerable to the shocks which began to jolt American agriculture in the early 1970’s. World crop failures caused skyrocketing prices for grains and proteins. This in turn sparked a series of U.S. export embargoes on wheat and soybeans which caused this country to lose its export markets. Now there is a glut of farm commodities. From 1970 to 1973 Idaho’s sheep producers saw hay prices increase 226 percent and barley, a basic feed grain, 250 percent. The old equations for profitability became prescriptions for heavy losses.

An unexpected roll of the political environmental dice dealt a second blow to the sheep industry. The winter of 1973 brought to a crashing halt one of the great cyclical tidal waves of jackrabbits for which southern Idaho has become famous. Behind this biomass of rabbits was a corresponding wave of hungry coyotes. The federal Animal Damage Control Program was then almost entirely dependent upon 1080 bait stations to deal with the phenomena. A Department of Interior official had secretly signed a court stipulation with the Defenders of Wildlife which removed all toxicants from the coyote control program. The result was the most unprecedented slaughter of lambs by coyotes which this writer has observed in 35 years.

From 1972 through 1979, stock sheep numbers in Idaho plummeted by one third. Survivors scrambled for ways to reduce costs. To minimize feed costs, efforts were made to further utilize crested wheat grass and native ranges during winter months. Lambing dates were shifted closer toward spring range greenup. This reduced the needs for hay and grain, but resulted in lighter lamb weaned from mountain pastures in July and August. Light weights clashed with cyclical marketing considerations. Traditionally prices for lambs peaked in early August and producers in Idaho attempted to have market-ready animals for the packing house prior to that date. Later lambing often coincided with lower prices for the final product. Producers then turned to feedlot finishing, finding it cost effective to feed the lamb after weaning rather than feeding the ewe during the winter months.

Overall, in Idaho, the trend was away from higher cost, intensive production schemes, and toward increasing reliance on lower cost range forages. Unfortunately, this necessary response to economic forces occurred when sheep production research was showing dramatic potentials for increased production from more intensive systems. Farm flock production in the midwestern U.S. caused increases in lamb and ewe prices. Iowa, Minnesota, and even some New England states had a demand for strong large, Suffolk cross Rambouillet of Columbia ewe lambs. These crossbreds, normally prime candidates for the packing plant, moved by the thousands from Idaho and other western states into producing farm flocks. Favorable economic expectations caused stock sheep numbers in Idaho to increase by 20,000 from 1979 to 1981.

This flush of enthusiasm was short lived. The economic chaos that hit the United States also hit the sheep industry. Twenty per cent interest rates, high unemployment, and
declining demand for meats took a frightful toil. Even financially conservative sheep producers became devasted when interest rates jumped to 17 percent or higher. Additionally, a rapidly expanding dairy industry in southern Idaho kept alfalfa prices relatively high. Heavy liquidation and conversion to cattle caused stock sheep numbers to drop 40 percent from 1981 to January 1, 1985. Record cold and early snows in the winters of 1983-84, '84-85 and the early part of '85-86 added to the existing burdens.

Grim as it may sound, there is a brighter side. In the past three years lamb prices have increased some 20 cents per pound. An increasing number of southern Idaho producers, especially those with the longest winter feeding period are sending flocks south for the winter to California or Arizona.

The ewes are lambed on the warm southern alfalfa fields in November or December and then trucked back to Idaho for lamb finishing on ranges in April or May.

A new approach to national lamb promotion by the American Sheep Producers Council combined with improved marketing efforts by some progressive meat packers appear to be strengthening the demand for a fine product. The market value of breeding ewes has almost doubled in the past two years. The few remaining range sheep producers in Idaho, if their debt levels are low, are earning limited profits for the first time in many years. The tough, adaptable, optimists which make up the Idaho sheep industry are today breathing easier than most others involved in agricultural production.

Rangeland Management and Livestock Production in Northeastern China

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This paper is based on observations made during seven trips to Beijing and the northeastern part of the Peoples Republic of China while serving as technical consultant to the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the United Nations Development Fund. Field observations were made during several trips to Heilongjiang Province, Hebei Province, and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The seven trips were made during August and September 1981, September 1982, April 1983, August to October 1983, and September and October 1984.

During the course of these trips, I had the opportunity to work with and discuss problems with a broad range of people in China. This included representatives of the Bureau of Animal Husbandry of the Ministry of Agriculture, Provincial officials, League, County, and Banner officials, Commune, Brigade officials, and members of Brigades, individual stockmen and herdsmen involved with agriculture and livestock production both before and during the social and economic changes that are taking place in China.

China is a large, diverse and dynamic country. I consider myself fortunate to have the opportunity to work with the Chinese in a technical subject matter field in which I have spent my professional life. There is no intent to pose as a “China expert” or to imply that my observations and interpretations are representative of China. They are merely my observations and interpretations.

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