

# STRENGTHENING THE AMERICAN WOOL INDUSTRY

## SHEEP SHEARING

*A series of bulletins containing valuable information for the wool industry.*



### Opportunities for Both Full-Time and Part-Time Shearers

Shortly after the domestication of sheep, the job of harvesting wool or shearing became an important necessity in sheep production and agriculture. Wool has clothed civilization for thousands of years and today, it continues to be a fabric used in fashion, active and military wear. Wool is a valuable commodity in U.S. sheep production – generating more than \$37 million dollars of income to the sheep industry each year. Since wool is a renewable crop that must be sheared annually, sheep production provides a steady job opportunity for sheep shearers.

More than five million sheep are shorn annually in the United States on more than 68,000 farms and ranches across the nation. Approximately 70 percent of the sheep and wool production is produced by 10 percent of the U.S. sheep operations, with the remaining 90 percent of the operations being smaller flocks of less than 100 head. This diversity offers great potential for someone to consider sheep shearing as a profession in the United States. There is a growing trend in many states for both smaller flocks and mid-size commercial flocks offering shearing opportunities for many years to come.



shearing. A skilled sheep shearer can routinely shear 120 to 200 head of mature sheep a day. Output is dependent on many factors, including size of the sheep, condition of the wool and skill of the sheep shearer. Shearing is a learned expertise and the more experience the shearer obtains, the more efficient and skilled the worker – allowing for more financial gain.

As a profession, skilled shearers are in demand worldwide. Numerous countries advertise and encourage young people, both men and women, to seriously consider shearing as

a career. Although shearing is a physical job that requires proper training, skill and stamina, shearing schools train people on proper techniques to avoid injuries and to help make the job less strenuous. Advances in equipment and facility designs have also made shearing physically less demanding while reducing occupational hazards and injuries.

Small-flock and commercial shearing are the two most common ways for someone to have a career as a shearer.

#### **Small-Flock Shearer**

Entry into sheep shearing often begins as part of an FFA or 4-H project and a way to provide additional income. Many young people have paid for at least a portion of their college or schooling by shearing sheep on a part-time basis.



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Many people start off shearing only smaller flocks for two reasons: limited time for shearing and the high demand for sheep shearers willing to service small flocks. Flock sizes will range from one to 50 head. Fees charged to small-flock owners for shearing services routinely exceed commercial rates.

Many small-flock owners go to great lengths and effort to accommodate the shearer's schedule. In addition, it is not uncommon for the shearer to also provide other non-shearing related services such as hoof trimming and/or assisting with administration of medications. These additional services provide additional income.

## Commercial Shearer

While shearing does take place year round, it is generally considered a seasonal job because most of the shearing in the United States takes place between January and June. The seasonal nature of shearing is advantageous for many as it coincides with times where other employment opportunities are limited, such as farming, forestry or construction.

Frequently, commercial shearers team up for jobs at the larger sheep operations. In the western United States, crews of sheep shearers will travel together from ranch to ranch in a given area. Some shearing crews can have as many as 12 people; however, most today are between six to eight shearers in a crew. The shearing crew and sheep producer work together on how many shearers are needed for scheduling purposes.

In the Midwest and eastern United States, it is not uncommon for two to four sheep shearers to work

together shearing at commercial sheep farms. This relieves some of the monotony of shearing and provides companionship while working. Shearers and farmers schedule the number of sheep to be shorn in a given day and plan accordingly to the skill level of the shearers.

Large commercial lamb-feeding operations also provide an opportunity to shear more sheep year round. While rates per head for shearing feeder

lambs is typically lower, the smaller size of the animals allow for more sheep to be shorn per hour.



## International Demand of Shearers

As the average age of shearers increases worldwide, so too is the demand for shearers. Because sheep shearing is relatively seasonal in the United States, shearing contractors need to hire foreign labor to get the entire U.S. sheep flock sheared in the relatively narrow shearing season. Contractors would much rather employ U.S. citizens due to the additional governmental requirements. Foreign shearers do provide contacts for U.S. shearers wanting to shear in other countries.

U.S. sheep shearers are sought after internationally because of the additional physical stamina and skill required to shear the larger U.S. sheep breeds. Because of the differing season of the Southern Hemisphere, it is not uncommon for U.S. shearers to travel to countries such as New Zealand and Australia for shearing jobs. In addition, the United Kingdom is also a frequent destination for U.S. shearers with opportunities being available when shearing in the United States is less frequent.



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