

Background

Western Canada is home to a large number of sheep breeds, making it difficult for producers to know which ones to use in their own flocks. This diversity also causes widely varying lamb growth rates and carcass qualities, which affect the profitability of the sheep operation when those lambs are marketed. For meat sellers and processors, a uniform product is easier to process and sell.

Ewe flocks

Maternal breeds of sheep form the base of most farm flocks, selected for traits such as fertility, prolificacy, mothering, milking ability, grazing ability and /or wool quality and quantity. Lambs from these ewes tend to grow slowly and with less muscling. Maternal breeds of significant numbers in Alberta include the Dorset, East Friesian, Polypay, Rideau Arcott, Rambouillet, and Romanov.

Cross breeding

In a 3-way terminal cross, producers choose two maternal breeds with complementary traits that will work in their production system, and mate these crossbred ewes to a terminal sire, a ram of a breed that specializes in growth rate and carcass quality. The most common terminal sire breeds in Alberta include the Suffolk, Charollais, Canadian Arcott and Texel. The Ile de France breed is a recent arrival in Alberta from Europe.

Research

A comparison of these terminal sire breeds, using rams from Canadian breeders to accurately represent the genetics available, would help commercial lamb producers choose the right terminal sire breed for their flock and marketing program, and make it easier for Alberta processors to source lambs of uniform, premium quality.



Lambs of all shapes and sizes come to slaughter at Sunterra Meats, Innisfail. Consumers expect consistent size and quality when they buy meat. Canadian lamb competes with imported lamb from New Zealand, which is a uniform size and predictable quality.



These four lambs would all receive the same price if they were sold live. Differences in muscling and fat cover make some carcasses more valuable than others.



Both these lamb carcasses weigh 50 lb. Index pricing takes weight, muscle score and degree of finish into account, paying more for the carcass on the left.