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BeefTalk: Cattle and Sheep Together a Good Thing

Specialization may not always be the answer on a beef operation.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

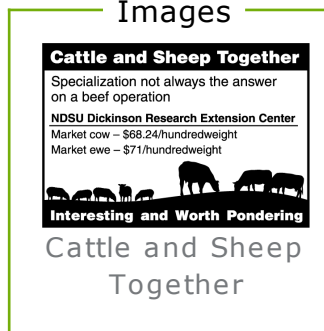
NDSU Extension Service

For thousands of years, meat, milk, leather, wool, mohair and cashmere have been essential components of human survival.

Producers historically have utilized a combination of cattle, sheep, goats and other ruminants to graze grasslands and provide the necessary food and clothing.

Today's agriculture is more specialized: The two dairy cows became a large modern dairy; the two sows moved to an automated farrowing center; the flock of 50 hens is now a complex of buildings housing thousands of broilers or laying hens;

Images



columns

[Spotlight on Economics: Spotlight on Economics: Accessing Agriculture's Big Data](#) (2017-03-02) The general question appears to be "who can do what" with respect to agriculture's big data. [FULL STORY](#)

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Cattle and Sheep Together a Good Thing](#) (2017-03-23) Specialization may not always be the answer on a beef operation. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Celebrate N.D. Agriculture's Contribution to Your Menus](#) (2017-03-23) North Dakota is the top producer of several crops. [FULL STORY](#)

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several crop species became a single crop to accommodate the larger bins, which were needed to fill the unit trains. Specialization continues.

No doubt, a broader, more comprehensive knowledge base is needed as a producer specializes. The market specs tighten and, unfortunately, the genetic components become more precise and demanding.

The room for error is little; markets are testy as consumer demands grow. One could lament, but generally, too much lamenting simply means a pending buyout by an operation that is moving in what appears to be forward.

The world of ruminants is no different. Where once was a farmyard of cattle, sheep and other critters, today, critters, if you can find any, will be specialized. Beef producers raise beef. While grass managers acknowledge that multispecies grazing is beneficial to the grasslands, such multispecies operations are decreasing.

In fact, livestock numbers have tended to drop as producers have specialized and the farmyard multispecies conglomeration of animals is moving to extinction. The trend is hard to buck to simply justify better grazing programs, but if there is a "will," there may be a "way."

Of course, many justifications exist for the single-species approach, but the bottom line is that the streamlining of specialized agriculture is a human

choice.

Perhaps coincidence, but the Dickinson Research Extension Center sold market cows on March 9 and a market ewe on March 13. The market cows averaged \$68.24 per hundredweight (cwt) and the only market ewe the center owned sold for \$71 per cwt.

Both shipments included additional animals, but the pondering point is the price of spent breeding stock sold as market livestock. Essentially, the market cows averaged 1,459 pounds and brought \$995.58 per head. The ewe weighed 160 pounds and brought \$113.60.

In this case, roughly nine ewes equal the equivalent weight of one cow. Thus, nine ewes would have brought \$1,022.40, compared with the one cow at \$995.58, which got me pondering. If the search really is to add income and productively to an operation, we have more solutions than simply cows.

Granted, adding sheep to a cattle operation means more work and producer education; however, that does not mean the opportunity is not there, despite the overwhelming odds and historical pressure to keep specializing.

What about the grass? What about the added dollars if dollars are tight? What about the opportunity for multigenerational collaboration? What about simply wanting to do something that

sustains the world?

The center maintains a flock of White Dorper and St. Croix crossbred hair sheep to graze in areas that the cattle will not. This area simply may be a space impractical for cattle to graze or where the sheep have a plant preference (sheep will eat what cattle will not). Either way, the sheep add utilization of forage and income where none existed before.

This approach has challenges. Most beef operations are stretched for labor. The center is no exception. Adding a more management-intensive species of livestock, such as sheep, often is passed by.

But survival in agriculture has two prongs. The first, the operation needs to be large enough to spread fixed costs across many production units. For cattle and sheep, that means a reasonable-sized herd or flock. Second, the operation needs to be cost-conscious, keeping expenses low while keeping the income per production unit high.

When appropriate, adding ewes to make the sheep enterprise significant without decreasing the cow herd makes sense. The center has utilized sheep through the years for forage management, particularly around the cattle pens during the summer.

Although the cattle pastures have not been targeted yet, several plant species there could be

managed better by multispecies grazing. But first, management hurdles need to be addressed to expand grazing.

As the center explored several types of sheep through the years, the White Dorper and St. Croix crossbred hair sheep have significant opportunity for effective utilization within the center's cattle operation. The lack of wool, thus no wool management, is significant.

The learning curve is steep, but doable. But do we want to? "Yes" is the correct answer.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu.

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Attachments



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