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BeefTalk: Cattle, So Why Not Sheep, Too?



Diversification in today's specialization world is OK.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

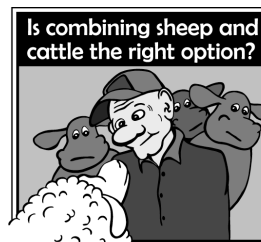
Previous discussions in this column noted sheep can be stocked on a cattle operation at the rate of one cow, one ewe without a negative impact on grazing.

In fact, ecological advantages certainly result when cattle and sheep (and perhaps even goats) cohabitate on grasslands. However, suggesting that option usually produces some simple stares, and perhaps a shrug

Images



Is combining sheep and cattle the right option?
(NDSU graphic)



Is combining sheep and cattle the right option?
(NDSU graphic)

columns

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Cattle, So Why Not Sheep, Too?](#) (2017-04-06)

Diversification in today's specialization world is OK. [FULL STORY](#)

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use of releases

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or two, and life continues. Occasionally, a verbal response, generally negative, is generated despite the historical data that show such a decision would be beneficial to the grasslands and positive to the checkbook.

So why bring up a topic for which producers have little desire for implementation? Well, let's just say this: Opportunities always are worth talking about. In reality, if a response is positive, most likely many unanswered questions remain.

But that being said, operations have implemented cattle and sheep grazing and have been very successful. Also, some have tried the implementation of cattle and sheep on the grasslands and have failed.

What are the difficulties? To begin, the sheep industry, like most agricultural industries, has improved product output. Wool and lamb products are marketed to specifications that have market rewards and more work but, one hopes, more payback. The same is true with cattle because calves are marketed to meet increasing specifications for the market.

The hope is that these specifications will embrace market rewards as well as increasing net profit. Specification marketing, however, challenges the commodity concept of agricultural production.

Historically, average product income from several enterprises was pooled and the total would

sustain the operation. If one enterprise failed, the others picked up the difference. Today, that's not true because more production is gained through specialization, and price protection is available through government programs, private insurance or a combination of the two.

Although diversification was good insurance, today, specialization is the norm. Specialization demands more purchased inputs to maintain ideal growing conditions to meet desired market specifications. Unfortunately, diversification is set aside, which is a reality check.

But contrary to current opinion, travelling down a more diverse agricultural path is all right. Education will help, some ability to withstand growing pains is needed, and the time and labor to implement a new enterprise are essential.

The path is not simple, nor will it be quick, and producers have no assurances. The choice, specialization or diversification, is solely a producer choice, and one needs to be careful not to assume one is right and the other wrong, although this debate is good coffee talk.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center is no different. Adding sheep has not been easy. In fact, the internal stories are rather harrowing - and I am not talking about tilling the ground; it was more like pillage and plunder.

However, the center still has sheep. What makes

sheep so difficult? The center's ewes average 160 pounds, the cows 1,440. You need about nine ewes to equal one cow. If a lamb weighs 9 pounds at birth and a calf weighs 81 pounds at birth, nine lambs equal one calf.

Put 1 cup of water in a freezer alongside a container holding 9 cups (a little more than a half-gallon) of water. Which freezes quicker? The cup with the smaller amount, of course.

That's the start of the problem. The smaller the animal is, the more care required. Sheep don't die easier than cattle, but it means that one must respond quicker to a problem.

If a coyote or other predator comes along and the choice is a 9-pound lamb protected by a 160-pound ewe or an 81-pound calf protected by a 1,440-pound cow, which does the coyote choose? The answer is a no-brainer: the lamb, and more than likely, the ewe will have two lambs, so the meal is easier and dessert is provided.

Neither of these issues is insurmountable, just problematic. For sheep to survive within a cattle operation, a paradigm shift is necessary: Producers need to respond quickly to illness and weather issues. Except for susceptibility to parasites, sheep do not have an increased incidence of health issues, but an internal and external parasite program is needed.

Fencing also must be considered. With new electric

fence techniques, cattle and sheep can cohabitate without predator issues.

I am not going to say that step is simple or cheap. Recent understanding indicates that bonding cattle and sheep decreases predator loss; plus, the use of guard dogs offers good predator control. Bonded cattle and sheep work together and help the grasslands.

Finally, a ewe should wean 80 percent-plus of her body weight annually, while a cow most likely will wean a little more than 40 percent. Twice the production requires better nutritional monitoring during pregnancy and lambing, so producers can make no nutritional mistakes.

Nevertheless, the opportunity with cattle and sheep is real.

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](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



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the right option? \(NDSU graphic\)](#) 

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