

Precision Flock Management

An Introduction



Precision Flock Management (PFM) is a systematic management approach for getting the most from your flock.

PFM is based on a management mindset that looks at the whole flock. PFM:

- Uses information, tools and technology to gather, record, and analyze data for improved decision-making.
- Focuses on key areas to improve flock production and financial performance: feed efficiency, ewe productivity, labour, cost reduction, increased income per marketed lamb, and wise investing.
- Uses benchmarks and target setting to capitalize on strengths and reduce waste.
- Improves flock financial and production performance.
- Uses short and long-term plans to improve key areas.
- Allows you to track and assess the impact of management changes.



GOALS & BENEFITS:

Develop systems to improve flock management
Collect accurate information
Analyze data for better management decisions
Implement decisions to make improvements
Assess the impact of changes

Precision Flock Management provides a step-by-step process to more effective flock management:

- 1. Collect financial information on your flock.**
 - Gain control, and manage effectively, by tracking sheep specific income and expenses in your financial records.
- 2. Collect individual and flock production information.**
 - Know your flock. Not every ewe, ram and lamb is profitable.
 - Tagging every animal allows you to track key pieces of information: individual animal identification; start and ending inventories; numbers sold, bought and the ones that died; lamb weights and critical birth, weaning, treatment and shipping dates.
 - Use flock management software, like *SDL FarmWorks*, which is an RFID tool for accurate collection of flock data.
- 3. Know how to make sense of all the records you keep.**
 - Analyzing electronic information is faster, easier and more accurate than previous paper record keeping methods.
 - Flock management software, like *SDL FarmWorks*, generates reports that allow you to make decisions quickly and confidently.
 - *The Flock Snapshot** combines both financial and production information to analyze flock performance, to set targets for flock improvements and to compare your flock's performance to benchmark averages.
- 4. Identify issues and address root causes.**
 - Tracking flock performance makes it easier to identify problems. Being able to analyze lambing percentage, the number of open ewes and weaning reports helps you focus on ways to improve ewe productivity.
 - Nutrition plays a role in the performance of every animal in the flock and underlies a number of production problems. *SheepBytes* ration balancer software analyzes feeds, animal requirements and environmental factors developing the best ration for every animal group. It also provides information on costs on a per head per day basis.

Please go to: www.ablamb.ca or www.agriculture.alberta.ca for more information on the Flock Snapshot and other electronic tools to support your profitable flock management. You can find more details on the SheepBytes Ration Balancer application at www.sheepbytes.ca



5. Set targets: Increase the lambs marketed per ewe.

- Use your own flock data to assess current production. Decide on specific areas for improvement. If 95 out of every 100 ewes exposed to the ram give birth, set a target for 98 out of every 100 for next year. Increasing the number of ewes who give birth to healthy lambs is a key factor in increasing the number of lambs available to market.
- Comparing your own flock performance with key benchmark averages allows you to assess how your flock is performing when compared to other similar flocks. Benchmark averages also help you to see how 'real' the targets you set may be.
- Use weaning reports to analyze ewe performance, identifying both the top and the bottom producing ewes in the flock. Culling ewes that eat all year and don't wean a lamb has a big impact on profit margins and selecting replacement ewe lambs from the right ewes improves overall flock productivity.

6. Make an action plan. Focus on one area such as ewe productivity.

- What was the production level per ewe this year – how many lambs were available to sell or keep from the ewes you put with rams last fall?
- What is your target for improving ewe production for next year? For the next five years?
- What are your options? Do you know why ewe productivity is low – flock nutrition or health, body condition, season? Are you missing any key information such as knowing exactly which ewes were put to the rams?
- Do you know how to set up an action plan with 'to do lists', timelines, and a budget?
- Do you write it all down? A written plan is easier to assess than a faint memory.

Change takes time. The results of removing the bottom performing ewes and selecting from the top performing ewes will show up over a number of years as 'trends' in lower feed costs and more lambs per ewe going to market. Those two key actions will improve the productivity and overall value of your sheep enterprise.

The most effective and efficient flock managers use systems that help put together all the pieces needed to run a profitable sheep operation. Managing feeding and grazing programs that help control feed costs; handling systems that help reduce labour; lambing facilities and data management that help reduce lamb death losses; and long-term plans that help maintain profitability through the ups and downs of markets and weather.

Flock managers who use the practices and tools of PFM add to the efficiency and performance of the whole industry—benefitting everyone. The modern nail gun replaced hammers, which replaced a rock on a stick because carpenters needed better tools to make building faster and easier.

PFM is building new systems and tools. RFID technology, the internet and new software tools can help lamb producers fine-tune their businesses. PFM is another way the lamb industry is working together to improve business results for producers and to supply top quality lamb products for consumers.

Content: Sue Hosford, Alberta Agriculture & Rural Development
Tony Stolz, Stolz-Williams Consulting Ltd.
Margaret Cook, Alberta Lamb Producers
Photos: THagedorn, Alberta Agriculture & Rural Development

Your partners in building better lambs

ALMA
Alberta Livestock
and Meat Agency Ltd



**Government
of Alberta** ■