

Lambs bring ‘best prices ever’ in Douglas County

By **CRAIG REED**
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — June and July were profitable months for sheep producers in Douglas County, Ore.

The county’s spring lamb crop was sold at an average of \$1.75 to \$1.80 a pound live weight. The lamb price “was the best we’ve ever received,” said Dan Dawson, a county sheep rancher. Dawson said the price was 20 to 25 cents higher than a year ago.

According to the most recent National Agricultural Statistics Service, there are approximately 23,000 ewes in Douglas County. It is estimated the county’s lamb crop that went to market numbered 34,000. The average weight of the market lambs was 100 to 120 pounds.

“Lambs and sheep are still a major part of the county’s economy,” Dawson said. “The lambs are marketed as grass-fed natural, making them more appealing, and they go to specialty markets and restaurants. The lighter lambs are finished on irrigated pasture before going to market.”

The 43 producers who were participating in the Douglas County Livestock Association’s wool pool received 80 cents a pound for their fleeces from both ewes and lambs. The Woolgatherer Carding Mill of Montague, Calif., had the highest of the three bids received for the product.

Woolgatherer had bid on the county wool in the past, and purchased the pool in 2013.

“This is a very good price compared to the open market,” Troy Michaels said of the 80 cents a pound. Michaels is a sheep rancher and chairman of the wool pool committee.

However, the bid was 26 cents less than the pool price of a year ago. Hank Kearns, the chief operating officer for Woolgatherer, said the reason for the lower price is because China is importing less of the product than last year, diminishing the demand for coarse wool and creating an oversupply.



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press
Members of the Roseburg, Ore., Mat Club do the heavy lifting at the Douglas County Livestock Association’s wool pool shipping day. Eleven members of the club helped with unloading the bales of wool, getting them weighed and getting them loaded on a truck.

Kearns described the wool as “excellent quality for coarse wool.”

The total of the pool was 89,555 pounds. That tonnage is about the same as the pool’s weight for each of the last two years, according to Michaels. Two semi-truck box trailers were loaded and headed south to the mill in Northern California, where the county’s coarse wool product will be made into batting for mattresses and furniture.

Kearns said the reason Woolgatherer bid for this wool was its low vegetation matter and its consistency, explaining the wool didn’t have a lot of dirt and grass tangled in it, leaving “a good clean product.”

“This pool has a lot of value to our business, we value the growers and we wanted the lot,” Kearns said of the high bid. “Our company will make it into batting and then sell it to mattress and furniture companies that use it in their products. Those folks are primarily interested in natural, chemical-free products.”

Helping out with the wool shipping process were 11 members of the Roseburg



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press
Ethan Stone, a member of the Roseburg, Ore., Mat Club, rolls a bale of wool toward a truck for shipping. The 43 producers who participated in the Douglas County Livestock Association’s wool pool received 80 cents a pound for their fleeces.

Mat Club and coaches Steve Lander and Doug Singleton. The teenage members unloaded the wool bales that ranged in weight from 400 to 500 pounds from trailers and flatbed trucks, rolled and lifted the bales onto scales to be weighed, then rolled them off the scales. A forklift lifted the bales and stacked them in the semi-trailers.

“It’s nice to have the wrestling kids in here to help with the physical work,” Michaels

said. “It’s a good, different type of weight training for those kids. We make a donation to the mat club for their efforts and to help out their program.”

For many years back in the 1900s, Douglas County was home to about 100,000 ewes. Low lamb and wool prices through the years and lamb losses to predators were two key reasons ranchers downsized their flocks.

In addition to being an economic factor in Douglas County, Dawson said the sheep population is important because the animals help limit vegetation that can fuel possible wildfires. The sheep will eat back blackberry canes and other forage, decreasing the amount of ground fuel on valley and hillside pastures.



Capital Press File

Unit sales of larger tractors and combines have dropped at a slower rate in 2017 compared to last year, when they plunged more than 20 percent.

Machinery sales near ‘bottom of difficult cycle’

Sales of tractors, combines decline at slower rate

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Farmers are continuing to pull back from buying large tractors and combines in 2017, though sales aren’t plunging as steeply as they did last year.

Through mid-year in the U.S., unit sales have decreased 14 percent for two-wheel-drive tractors over 100 horsepower and 6 percent for four-wheel-drive tractors and combines, according to the Association of Equipment Manufacturers.

While that’s hardly a stellar performance for the farm machinery industry, unit sales in each of those categories dropped more than 20 percent in 2016.

“It would indicate we’re getting closer to the bottom of a difficult cycle,” said Charlie O’Brien, senior vice president at AEM.

As of last year, unit sales of larger tractors and combines had fallen by nearly 55 percent overall since the most recent peak in 2013, tracking the reduction in farm incomes caused by lower commodity crop prices.

Dealers have also been dealing with a glut of fairly new trade-in machinery that’s depressed demand for new tractors and combines, though

the surplus appears to be easing, said O’Brien.

Last year, 59 percent of dealers said inventories of used machinery were too high, but that has shrunk to 48 percent in 2017, he said.

“A lot of that used equipment has been flushed through the system,” O’Brien said.

With more room on their lots, dealers are able to accept trade-ins when farmers are ready to buy new machinery, he said.

Manufacturers have already adjusted to reduced demand by shuttering factories and cutting back production shifts, O’Brien said.

There are indicators farmers are also becoming more accustomed to the new environment of lower commodity prices, though debt-to-asset ratios have grown, indicating their balance sheets have deteriorated on the whole, he said.

The “macroeconomic” trends for agriculture are positive, given long-term population growth, but the machinery industry isn’t expecting another sales boom like the one in 2012-2013, O’Brien said.

“I think everybody agrees that was a bubble, but I don’t think this is normal, either,” he said.

However, surveys of farmers indicate that most still believe it’s currently not a good time to buy machinery or invest in buildings, said Michael Langemeier, an agricultural economist at Purdue University who studies the industry.

Roza Irrigation District testing its new reservoir

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

SUNNYSIDE, Wash. — The first water has flowed into a new \$31 million reservoir off the Roza Canal that soon will capture irrigation water once lost to wasteways and the Yakima River.

The first of five pumps was tested Aug. 2. It pumps water from the canal into the 1,600-acre-foot reservoir in Washout Canyon, five miles north of Sunnyside.

“This project had its origins in the 1970s and really gathered steam in the early 1980s when the Roza Irrigation District adopted a water conservation plan,” said Scott Revell, district manager.

Early on, the district considered building a larger reservoir for greater storage but decided it would cost too much, Revell said.

Geologic and technical studies on where to locate the reservoir took 10 to 15 years. Property acquisition, design and funding all took time.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is paying 65 percent of the project and the state Department of Ecology and Roza district are each paying 17.5 percent.

The Roza Irrigation District operates 95 miles of main canal and more than 350 miles of laterals serving 1,700 growers on 72,000 acres from the northwestern edge of the Yakima Valley at Selah to the southeastern end at Benton



Courtesy Roza Irrigation District

From left, Roza Watermaster Clay Bohlke, Board Vice President Jim Willard, District Manager Scott Revell and consulting engineer Stan Schweissing watch the first water flow into a new reservoir.

City. Water is diverted from the Yakima River at Roza Dam into the canal 10 miles north of Selah in Yakima Canyon.

The district is the largest one most severely impacted in drought years because it operates solely on junior water rights, which are the first to be restricted in droughts.

The district uses about 300,000 acre-feet of water annually.

Right now, when a grower in the lower part of the district orders water it takes two days for the water to arrive from the dam and by then the weather may have changed and the grower may not need as much. Water that isn’t used goes into one of several

wasteways that take it back to the Yakima River, Revell said.

The new reservoir, called a reregulation reservoir, allows the district to pump such excess water from the canal into the reservoir and hold it for later use in the lower half of the district instead of dumping it into the wasteways. It will enable the water master at the dam to fine tune diversions, saving water and providing more equal shares to everyone in the district.

The reservoir covers 35 acres, is 70 feet deep and will hold 1,600 acre-feet of water. It will be operating at the end of August but won’t be full until next spring’s mountain runoff.



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