

Shearing season on an Oregon sheep farm

By Jayati Ramakrishnan
EO Media Group

As a sheep flips from its back to its front legs and scrambles out the small door of a trailer, it's as much as 20 pounds lighter than when it entered a few minutes before.

"Just like everyone gets a haircut," said Kip Krebs, ranch manager of Krebs Sheep Company.

It's sheep-shearing season, and in about two days, workers will shear about 2,800 sheep at the Krebs Sheep Company before moving on to another operation to repeat the process. The company will then send about 100 bales of wool to Pendleton Woolen Mills, as they've been doing for more than 70 years.

Krebs Sheep Company is one of a few large operations in Eastern Oregon. They raise Targhee and Rambouillet sheep, and Suffolk-cross rams. The business has been in the family for four generations. Kip Krebs, 28, was busy on Tuesday, moving bales of wool and loading a truck, and supervising the workers as they herded and sheared sheep. His father, Skye, was outside helping with herding, and his mother and wife do the books. The family lives on a ranch tucked in the hills of northeast Gilliam County, just down the road from the pens where they shear sheep.

But the rest of those working at Krebs during shearing season live a more nomadic lifestyle.

"In another month I'll have three of these crews on the road," said Bernie Fairchild.

Fairchild travels from his home in Buhl, Idaho, each year with a crew of employees comprised mostly of men from Uruguay, in the U.S. on work visas. The crew does every-



Staff photo by Kathy Aney/East Oregonian
Cody Gowdry (foreground) and John Balderson, of Balderson Shearing, shear sheep Tuesday at the Krebs sheep ranch near Lone.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney/East Oregonian
Niere Quispealaya, one of three Peruvian brothers working at the Krebs sheep ranch, watched sheep progressing through a long chute to the shearing trailer on Wednesday. If one stopped, he nudged it along.

thing, including shearing, grading, and packing the wool. They work for about eight hours a day for two or three days at each ranch

— and then move onto the next one.

The workers spend January through June in the U.S., covering seven west-

ern states — Oregon, Washington, California, Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming. In a 12-month period, Fairchild said the

crew will shear about 310,000 head of sheep. He said it's hard to find American workers who will take that job.

"No Americans want to do it anymore," he said. "It's too hard of work."

He said in the states he works in, there are likely less than 10 crews that work shearing season. He said it's been difficult to get government approval for workers to come to the U.S.

"Thank God they let us (bring workers in)," he said. "Otherwise we wouldn't have a job."

Bryann Gonzalez has been working as a sheep shearer for nine years.

"I started when I was 16 years old, with a friend," he said in Spanish. "It's difficult, especially if the animal is not calm."

Gonzalez said he works in the U.S. and Uruguay, although he worked as a shearer in Spain for one year.

Krebs also employs four full-time employees

as sheep herders. The four men, all brothers, are Peruvian. They have worked for Krebs for more than a decade, and live in the U.S. on work visas, staying in trailers on the Krebs property.

John Balderson, an Idaho resident who runs Balderson Shearing Company, has been traveling around to sheep ranches with his trailer for decades.

"This trailer has one million, 30 thousand miles on it," he said.

The workers aren't the only ones who move around. Krebs said the sheep get trucked to several different places throughout the year. They start the year on the ranch in Gilliam County, where they lamb. In late April or May, they'll be trucked to Wallowa County. In July or August, the lambs will be sold to a livestock company in Colorado, and the adults will be brought to irrigated grass or alfalfa circles in Umatilla and Morrow County.

The sheep were relaxed as workers turned them from side to side, reaching their undersides with a razor. Shearer Hank Little said there's a standard pattern that all shearers use, but they sometimes get anxious when shearers get to the sensitive areas.

"The most difficult part? What he's doing right there," Little said, pointing to the worker next to him, who was shearing the sheep around its udder.

They leave about a quarter-inch of fleece on the sheep, but shearing removes the sheep's natural lanolin, a greasy substance that sheep secrete. It protects the sheep, and for a few days after they're sheared, they are more susceptible to getting sick if they're exposed to freezing rain.

"It's kind of a shock to the system," Krebs said.



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Cloverleaf Hall

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Cocktails At 5:00 PM

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Auction At 7:30 PM

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Buffet by Chuck Wagon Sisters includes Stangel buffalo, chicken and pulled Pork

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