

Second annual Sheep Showcase flaunts those woolly wonders

CALGARY – The consumers are clamoring. The producers are inquiring. The numbers are multiplying.

To quote the Alberta Lamb Producers, “baa is the new moo.”

The Calgary Stampede established the inaugural Sheep Showcase last year based on the belief that the sheep industry is ready to make major gains in Alberta. And given the response across the board, there’s no reason to reject this ruminant rationale.

“Last year, the public very clearly wanted to know two main things – where you can buy local or Alberta lamb, and what the best ways are to cook it,” says Alan Breakey, vice-chair of the Stampede’s Sheep committee and co-ordinator of the Sheep Showcase.

“I’ve also had more calls this year than I have in any of the last 25 from people looking for ewe lambs and breeding ewes to increase or start their flocks. It’s absolutely stunning,” adds Breakey, who operates Rusty Bucket Farm, a sheep breeding operation, near Bragg Creek, Alta., with his wife Elizabeth.

“And almost 60 per cent of the Canadian market is still supplied by foreign lamb. That’s a huge chunk of the market, and Canadian suppliers could continually chip away at that niche. It’s an automatic opportunity.”

Bigger and better, the Stampede’s Sheep Showcase – a collaboration between the Stampede, the Alberta Lamb Producers, the Alberta Sheep Breeders’ Association (ASBA), and the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency (ALMA) – returns in 2011 with the same two-pronged logistical approach.

A revamped and expanded exhibit in the Agrium Ag-tivity in the City area, catering to consumers, international visitors, and potential sheep ranchers, will be open for 11 days, from Sneak-a-Peek Night on Thursday, July 7, through Sunday, July 17. Meanwhile, a more industry-focused exhibition will be established in the Agriculture Barns from Tuesday, July 12 through Sunday, July 17.

The sheep exhibit at Agrium Ag-tivity in the City, open daily from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., will itself be separated into two distinct areas. One area will concentrate on the live animal – discussing management, husbandry, and best-care practices, with a pen of live sheep and video displays. The other side, featuring a bistro/deli setting, will focus on sheep marketing and sheep products, with computer displays allowing visitors to select and e-mail recipes to themselves and friends.

“With some, the perception is that eating lamb is a specialty event, like turkey at Christmas,” says Breakey. “We’re trying to promote it more as something you’d consider eating any day of the week.”

In the Agriculture Barns, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. starting Tuesday, various retail displays and industry booths will demonstrate the versatility of sheep, and the myriad products available from these amazing animals beyond wool and meat.

The Alberta Lamb Producers contributed recipes, graphics, and industry information for the new sheep exhibit. ALMA provided funding, and ASBA contributed sheep breed information – as well as some helpful expertise from Breakey, its past chair.

The sheep industry is said to be worth more than \$125 million annually, partially because nothing from a sheep carcass goes to waste — including sinew, leather, and sheepskins.

As of Tuesday, anywhere from eight to 10 breeds – most likely including North County Cheviots, Suffolks, Katahdins, Black Welsh Mountain Sheep, Texels, Dorpers, Southdowns, and Scottish Blackface – will be on display in the Agriculture Barns, with breeders arriving from all across rural Alberta. There'll also be regular shearing and trimming demonstrations.

Visitors will discover wool's diverse uses – from upholstery to tennis ball covers to pool-table baize – as well as its distinct advantage in the area of apparel, since it provides perfect body climate control.

"There are manufacturers of insulation using wool. Apart from the insulation value, wool is inflammable – so, from a fire-retardant point of view, it's better than most synthetic products out there," says Breakey. "As for backcountry enthusiasts, wool is the No. 1 product to wear because it dries very quickly, and retains its heat even when wet.

"In a lot of outdoor clothing, undergarments in particular, wool products are held in much higher regard than synthetics or synthetic combinations. And that outdoor market keeps growing every year."

The Stampede will be webcasting all events being held in the Scotiabank Saddledome and the Big Top this year. Visit <http://ag.calgarystampede.com/saddledome-ustream-2011> for live streaming of Saddledome action, and <http://ag.calgarystampede.com/big-top-ustream-2011> for events under the Big Top.

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The Calgary Stampede is a volunteer-supported, not-for-profit community organization that preserves and promotes western heritage and values. The Stampede contributes to the quality of life in Calgary and southern Alberta through its world-renowned 10-day Stampede, year-round facilities, western events and several youth and agriculture programs. All revenue is reinvested into Calgary Stampede programs and facilities. For more about the Stampede, visit www.calgarystampede.com.