

From Agri-News July 4, 2011 [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/newslett.nsf/all/agnw18192](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/newslett.nsf/all/agnw18192)

Great Alberta chefs are busy preparing their summer menus, and locally produced foods are 'centre-of-the-plate' and in high demand. The media has discovered what most chefs, some consumers and all lamb producers know – there isn't enough Alberta lamb to go around.

"Lamb production in Alberta, and Canada, has been declining since the world wars ended and more so since 2003," says Susan Hosford, business development – sheep/lamb industry, with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. "Canada's ewe flock declined from 977,600 head in 2005 to 813,600 in 2011. Today Canada produces less than half of the lamb enjoyed by a growing number of Canadian consumers.

"Global demand for lamb is high, and so are prices, but supplies are not. Demand has been growing in Canada and traditional European markets and is now growing in emerging markets in the Middle East, South East Asia and China."

The global giants in lamb production – Australia, New Zealand and South America have been faced with combined challenges, such as severe weather which can disrupt lamb production and the growing competition for resources (land, feed, and water) that leads to higher production costs and lower profitability for producers and processors.

Some production/demand statistics:

- Australia's flock hit an all time low of 67 million sheep in 2010 due to weather (drought, fires, and floods) – all of which impacted feed supply. Australia is slowly rebuilding flocks except in key states where drought is still a factor. Australia is seeing growing domestic consumption and notable growth in demand from the Middle East, South East Asia and China.
- New Zealand breeding ewe numbers declined to 22 million and in 2010, when adverse weather reduced the lamb crop by 10 per cent. While slow rebuilding is taking place, NZ has been unable to meet export demand from key markets in the European Union (EU) and North America.
- Uruguay's production fell 40 per cent in 2010. Their largest market is Brazil and then the EU.
- Argentina exports a small amount of lamb with 59 per cent of exports going to the EU.

In addition to encouraging lamb consumption, the Alberta lamb industry is working together on initiatives to increase productivity to meet consumer demand. Sheep in every field and lamb on every plate is a statement that summarizes goals of Alberta Lamb Producers to increase production and ensure high quality lamb for consumers.

Current industry initiatives in Alberta focus on:

- Ensuring consistent lamb carcass quality. There is a market for every lamb so every lamb has to be good. Electronic feedback of carcass data from processor to producer is being piloted.
- Improving flock businesses using electronic data management systems for financial and production record-keeping, business analysis and management. Flock Snapshot financial analysis provides a status report of the flock and allows comparisons with industry benchmarks.

- Increasing production per ewe and reducing flock costs using flock management software to record and analyze breeding flock productivity.
- Using new electronic technology systems to reduce labour and increase efficiency in handling large numbers of sheep.

“Higher prices of the past few years have resulted in slight increases in the Alberta breeding flocks; 2.0 per cent from January 2009 to January 2010, and again by 4.5 per cent to January 2011,” says Hosford. “More lambs and good prices are part of the profitability picture. Alberta producers, processors, industry organizations and government have agreed there is a need to collaborate to build a profitable industry.”

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