

# Marketing Lambs in Kansas



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## Marketing

Building brand recognition in the sheep industry is essential for producers entering the market. Whether selling directly to consumers or through sale barns, an effective marketing plan can expand your reach.

Start by identifying your target market and defining the products you intend to sell. Establishing clear business goals and objectives will guide decisions, such as how to form breeding groups for the year. Consider key questions early: What breed of sheep or products will you sell? Where will you market them? What time of year will you sell?

Create a brand that reflects your production philosophy. Establish brand recognition by designing a farm logo and name. Many producers also use social media to expand their customer base and promote their product. Networking — both in-person and online — can significantly boost your marketing efforts, regardless of your operation's size or style.

Consider enrolling in the National Sheep Improvement Program (NSIP) to provide estimated breeding values (EBVs) for your flock. These values help producers turn performance records for economically important traits, such as birth weight, maternal ability, and parasite resistance, into valuable information about an animal's genetic merit. These science-based tools not only help improve desired traits but also serve as strong selling points that boost buyer confidence in your product.

Developing a clear production and marketing plan early helps manage costs and sets your operation up for long-term success. Using a combination of the strategies outlined in this publication, along with a strong understanding of your market, improves your chances in an ever-changing industry. Stay flexible by regularly reviewing and adjusting your marketing strategies and target markets to maximize returns.

## Challenges

Sheep producers face a range of challenges. Being aware of these challenges early on allows for proactive planning. Environmental threats, such as predators, can be mitigated with proper fencing — ideally flush with the ground or buried. Installing traps in common predator pathways and reinforcing weak points in fences can reduce losses. Livestock guardians such as dogs, donkeys, or llamas are effective deterrents when properly trained. However, poorly trained guard animals may harm the flock, so proper training is essential.

Weather and seasonality also affect flock productivity. Harsh winters or hot summers can strain both animals and producers. Develop protocols for lambing during extreme conditions, including ensuring vulnerable lambs have access to shelter. Natural windbreaks, such as trees or man-made structures, offer shade and protection. Shearing should be timed based on the breeding schedule and local climate. For instance, while shearing before lambing can make it easier for lambs to nurse, winter-lambing systems must ensure ewes retain enough wool for insulation.

A major long-term challenge is the decline in the U.S. lamb market. U.S. sheep numbers peaked at 30 million head in 1945 but dropped to around 5 million by 2024. The industry is currently unable to meet domestic demand, so much of the lamb sold in grocery stores is imported from Australia and New Zealand.

Additionally, lamb is not a dietary staple for many Americans—about 30% have never tried it; however, a consistent year-round lamb supply is important to meet consumer needs. Demand spikes during cultural and religious holidays, leading to seasonal price fluctuations. An increase in demand for American lamb, especially with the modest growth of direct-to-consumer and ethnic markets, could help producers better offset costs and support a positive outlook for growth in the domestic sheep industry.

## Product

Most sheep producers aim to sell lamb meat, and there are several routes to market this product. Lambs of any age can be sold at a sale barn on a per-pound basis. Alternatively, producers may choose to retain ownership and send lambs to a feedlot, where they are finished over 30 to 90 days before slaughter. Most U.S. producers follow a spring-lambing model. Sending lambs to feedlots helps maintain a consistent harvest rate, ensuring a year-round supply. Others may raise lambs to finishing weight on-site or sell them post-weaning, either directly to consumers or selling them to a processor by the pound.

Your product strategy depends on your production scale, labor capacity, market access, and local demand. Some sale barns in Kansas publish market reports that can help time the breeding and selling for the highest profitability.

## Cost of Lamb

Lamb carcass pricing is influenced by factors such as carcass weight, quality grade, and yield grade. Although slaughter lambs are most commonly sold by live weight, some processors do offer pricing systems that consider carcass characteristics. In a carcass-based pricing system, the total value is calculated by multiplying the dressed carcass weight by the price per pound. This is the weight of the animal once it has been slaughtered before it is divided into whole-sale cuts to be sold. This price per pound can vary depending on carcass weight, yield grade, and quality grade.

To estimate a live animal's price per pound, the total carcass value should be divided by the animal's live weight at harvest. The difference between live value and carcass value is largely due to variations in dressing percentage and carcass traits such as yield and quality grade. Carcasses that meet or exceed industry standards may receive premiums, while subpar carcasses may be discounted.

Packers assign quality and yield grades to assess value. Quality grades include Prime, Choice, Good, Utility, and Cull and are based on carcass conformation and fat distribution. Yield grade, scored from 1 to 5, incorporates fat thickness, ribeye area, internal fat estimates, and hot carcass weight. Dressing percentage, the ratio of hot carcass weight to live weight, is also calculated to evaluate carcass efficiency.



Lambs approaching finishing weight, known as feeder lambs, are graded similarly, but while still alive. They are often categorized by frame size:

- Small: less than 100 pounds
- Medium: 100 to 120 pounds
- Large: greater than 120 pounds

Muscle scores range from 1 (most muscular) to 3 (least muscular). These scores help buyers estimate future carcass quality and inform pricing decisions.

## How to Read a Market Report

Understanding a market report is vital for pricing decisions. Auction reports typically categorize animals by age, sex, breed, weight, condition, and stage of production. Some auctions estimate age by examining the animal’s teeth, using terms like “broken mouth.”

Each category in a report includes the number of head sold and the price range. Prices are listed in hundredweight (cwt) — that is, the price per 100 pounds. To convert this to price per pound, divide the cwt value by 100.

For example, a 50-pound lamb that sells for \$250 would be listed at \$500/cwt, or \$5 per pound.

### Example of Market Report:

Category of animal	Price cwt	Number of head	Notes
Feeder lambs, 40 to 80 pounds	\$50 to \$110	320	Lambs weighing 40 to 80 pounds that are ready to be fed out to finishing weight. Price equals \$0.50 to \$1.10 per pound.
Hair ewes, choice 100 to 130 pounds	\$240 to \$275	111	Ewes displaying hair characteristics weighing 100 to 130 pounds that will likely grade choice based on fat. Price equals \$2.40 to \$2.75 per pound.
Feeder lambs, medium and large muscle score (1 or 2)	\$230 to \$300	140	Lambs that are medium and large in frame size and score a 1 or 2 in muscle score. Price equals \$2.30 to \$3.00 per pound.

## Types of Production

When selling lambs, producers fall into several categories. This table helps break down products and desired markets.

The commercial lamb industry is the biggest of those listed in the following table. Because so many producers choose to sell lambs this way, it's important to plan breeding seasons around what benefits you and your resources.

Producer type	Product	Market
Commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purebred or crossbred lambs.</li> <li>• Fast growing to hit desired market as quickly as possible.</li> <li>• Want to affect carcass qualities for meat purposes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End goal being a quality carcass for slaughter</li> <li>• Feedlots or auctions</li> <li>• Sold by the head or by pound</li> </ul>
Seedstock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purebred breeding stock, focusing on genetic and phenotypic improvements.</li> <li>• Contribute to next generation of the sheep industry.</li> <li>• Positively affect traits such as reproductive efficiency, parasite resistance, and growth.</li> <li>• May use registration or estimated breeding values for added profit.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Producers looking to heighten genetics in flock.</li> <li>• Elite animals sell at a higher rate.</li> <li>• Market can be more volatile.</li> <li>• Sold in groups or as individuals.</li> </ul>
Purebred/ Club Lambs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purebred or crossbred lambs.</li> <li>• Focus on phenotypic traits such as anatomy and body balance, structural correctness, and breed characteristics.</li> <li>• Primarily wethers who are intended for the show ring.</li> <li>• Genetics can give buyers an insight into how the animal will grow out and perform.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many avenues to sell lambs.</li> <li>• Online/live sales and private treaty most common.</li> <li>• Potentially the most volatile market, having the biggest price range.</li> <li>• Sold as individuals.</li> </ul>
Stocker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buy weaned animals and add value to prepare for finishing weight.</li> <li>• Train lambs to eat out of feed bunk, transition to a high-concentrate diet.</li> <li>• Sold to feedlot or for slaughter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedlots or finishing systems looking for lambs that have been converted to grain diets.</li> <li>• This phase lowers stress on animal.</li> <li>• Helps final goal of high-value carcass for meat purposes.</li> </ul>

## Traditional Market

According to the American Lamb Board, the traditional lamb market prefers larger, heavier lambs weighing between 120 and 160 pounds. Prices typically peak between July and October, making fall- or winter-lambing groups advantageous for producers targeting this market. While most U.S. lambs are born between January and May, there is a growing incentive to shift lambing to later in the year. This is due to reduced supply from June through August, creating an opportunity for producers who can time lambing for off-season markets. Breeding for fall lambs can help fill this supply gap and capitalize on peak pricing periods.

## Nontraditional Market

The nontraditional market is largely driven by ethnic and religious demand, often differing in timing, weight preferences, and harvesting practices from the traditional market.

According to the American Sheep Industry Association, approximately 58% of lamb consumed in the U.S. is by minority populations. When marketing to this sector, it is important to consider the lamb's weight, sex, and the preferred method of slaughter.

Halal and Kosher dietary laws emphasize humane treatment and specific slaughter requirements, which must be respected when marketing to these consumers. As a general guideline, lambs should remain uncastrated and have intact tails when sold for ethnic consumption, as this is often a cultural or religious expectation.

Lambs may be sold either at auction or directly to consumers in this market.



<b>Holiday</b>	<b>Time of year</b>	<b>Product desired</b>
<b>Western Easter</b>	Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 30 to 45 pounds.</li> </ul>
<b>Orthodox Easter</b>	Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 40 to 55 pounds.</li> <li>• Should be milk-fed as opposed to grain fed.</li> </ul>
<b>Pesach (Passover)</b>	Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 30 to 55 pounds.</li> </ul>
<b>Cinco de Mayo</b>	May 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 15 to 30 pounds.</li> </ul>
<b>Ramadan</b>	Early summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 to 80 pounds.</li> <li>• Must be younger than a year old.</li> <li>• Weights of 45 to 120 pounds are acceptable, and castration is optional.</li> <li>• This is a good time to cull older animals.</li> </ul>
<b>Eid al Fitr</b>	Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 to 80 pounds.</li> </ul>
<b>Eid ul Adha</b>	Early fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing at least 60 to 100 pounds.</li> <li>• Must be halal and blemish free.</li> <li>• Cannot have been castrated or docked in any way.</li> </ul>
<b>Muharram</b>	Fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 to 80 pounds</li> </ul>
<b>Rosh Hashanah</b>	Fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 to 110 pounds</li> </ul>
<b>Thanksgiving</b>	Late fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 110 pounds</li> </ul>
<b>Mawlid al Nabi</b>	Early winter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 to 80 pounds</li> </ul>
<b>Hanukkah</b>	Winter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 60 pounds and less.</li> <li>• Kosher slaughtering is required.</li> </ul>
<b>Christmas</b>	December 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lambs weighing 40 to 60 pounds.</li> <li>• Milk fed.</li> </ul>

<http://sheepgoatmarketing.info/#&panel1-1>

<https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/a-planning-calendar-for-sheep-herd-health-and-management.html>

<http://www.sheepgoatmarketing.info/calendar.php>



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