

ALBERTA SheepSmart

RESOURCES FOR PRODUCERS

Photo: THagedorn, AARD

Shearing and Animal Welfare

“All wool sheep must be shorn at least annually and as frequently as necessary, to mitigate animal health and welfare concerns.” Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep

WHY IS SHEARING NECESSARY?

Fleece growth is continuous in wool producing breeds of sheep. Sheep that are not sheared routinely are at an increased risk of health and welfare problems, such as:

- Difficulty moving, including becoming cast (unable to rise from lying position)
- Predation
- Heat stress and exhaustion
- Skin infections and irritations due to urine, feces and other materials becoming trapped in the wool
- Flystrike
- External parasites (e.g. keds, lice)
- Wool blindness and eye infections
- Complications for newborn lambs (e.g. ingesting manure from dirty wool, difficulty finding teats to nurse)

Although shearing is critically important for welfare, it can result in injuries and undue stress for sheep. Being well-prepared and planning ahead are essential for making shearing as safe and low-stress as possible for the sheep, shearer and handlers.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO SHEAR?

Sheep can be sheared at any time of the year. Plan shearing to complement annual management events and take animal welfare into account when deciding the best time to shear. Consider the following:

Availability of shelter: Shearing takes away the insulation that wool provides, making sheep more prone to cold stress, sunburn and irritation from insects. Space to shelter all sheep simultaneously is essential if shearing is planned when poor conditions are likely.

Heat stress: Many producers choose to shear in the spring to reduce the risk of heat stress.

Confinement housing: Shearing reduces barn humidity and space requirements for sheep housed inside.

Marketing: Shearing market animals improves hygiene and reduces the chance of carcass contamination from soiled wool.

Lambing: Shearing ewes **before** lambing has benefits including:

- Better hygiene for ewes and lambs
- Facilitates nursing for newborn lambs
- Less confusion and risk of injury to lambs at foot during shearing
- More warmth for lambs lying next to sheared ewes

Shearing heavily pregnant ewes increases stress, risk of injury and abortion. Full shearing is not recommended when ewes are within one month of lambing.

Crutching (clipping wool around udder, belly and hind quarters) provides many of the benefits of shearing, but requires less handling, time and training. Crutching is an option when full shearing is not recommended, such as for heavily pregnant ewes, or if there are restrictions due to weather or availability of shelter. Crutching is often beneficial at other times, as well, such as before breeding season or when flystrike is more likely.



Availability of shelter can restrict the timing of shearing. Do not plan shearing at times when poor conditions can be expected, unless there is adequate shelter for all sheep.

Planning ahead is essential for a safe and stress-free shearing day.

Shearer and animal welfare:

Shearer competence directly impacts the welfare of sheep. Ensure you have adequate training if you choose to shear your own flock. Most producers will contract a professional shearer. Ask for credentials and references before employing a shearer. Good shearers are often in high demand—be sure to book your shearing day at least three or four months in advance.

Facilities and management during shearing:

- When planning shearing and setting up facilities, keep in mind that the easier the job is for the shearer the lower the risk of mistakes and the less handling time for sheep.
- Ensure you have enough trained helpers available on shearing day to calmly move sheep and handle wool.
- A full handling system is not always necessary, but an efficient process for moving sheep will result in calmer, more easily sheared animals.
- Sheep must always be handled according to the Code of Practice*.
- Have sheep penned and ready for the shearer.
- Shearing wet sheep is very difficult. If possible, the holding pen should be covered to prevent delays if conditions are wet.
- Restricting feed and water for six to 12 hours before shearing will reduce rumen and bladder fill. Sheep are more comfortable when tipped and floors stay drier helping to maintain footing.
- Moving sheep to small holding pens near the shearing area will help keep the flow of sheep to the shearer consistent and will help the sheep 'settle' before shearing.
- Shearing should take place in an area that sheep are used to entering. This area must be under cover and have: good lighting; clean, dry, non-slip flooring; good ventilation; and access to an electrical outlet (if using electric shearers).
- If shearing must take place during poor weather and/or shelter for sheep after shearing is limited, consider using a cover comb or comb lifter to leave an insulating layer of wool.
- Have disinfectant and other first aid materials on-hand, and treat any injuries immediately.

Biosecurity during shearing:

- Ensure the shearer and others coming onto the farm (particularly from other properties with livestock) wear clean clothes, and have disinfected boots and equipment.
- Avoid spreading disease through your flock by shearing animals that are at the greatest risk for contracting disease first (e.g. shear young animals before older animals, shear healthy animals before any with known health problems).
- Disinfect equipment between groups and as needed.

Welfare after shearing:

- Monitor and treat any injuries.
- Provide extra feed, shelter and shade for sheep as needed depending on weather conditions.



Preparing facilities, employing a competent shearer and having enough trained helpers will help maintain welfare during shearing.

More information:

Contact the Alberta Lamb Producers for a list of shearers, wool buyers and depots, and shearing courses. www.ablamb.ca or 403-948-8533.

**The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep* is available at www.nfacc.ca.

The Canadian Cooperative Wool Growers (www.wool.ca, 800-567-3693) provides extensive information regarding management, shearing and wool handling practices to maximize wool quality.