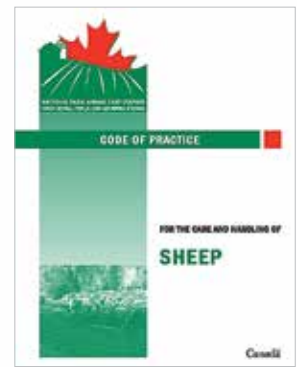


ALBERTA SheepSmart

RESOURCES FOR PRODUCERS

Photo: THagedorn, AARD



Handling Systems for Sheep

Facilities and equipment that make handling safer and less stressful are a valuable investment for ensuring the productivity of your flock.



Handling sheep is necessary to perform management practices that ensure the well-being and productivity of your flock, including veterinary treatment, vaccination, and sorting production groups. Improper handling, however, can result in costly injuries, lost productivity and lowered meat quality. Intentional mistreatment, such as hitting or lifting animals by the wool, is never acceptable and contravenes animal care laws. However, even the best intentioned of handlers can have difficulties if using a poorly designed handling system. As well as causing injuries and stress, handling may become so time consuming and frustrating that important management practices are delayed or avoided all together. Facilities and equipment that make handling safer and less stressful for sheep and handlers are a valuable investment for ensuring the productivity of your flock.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A HANDLING SYSTEM

The handling system you need will depend on individual considerations, such as the size and type of your operation. A handling system typically includes an arrangement of gathering and crowding pens, leading into a single-file race and treating chute. Sorting gates allow handlers to easily separate sheep into production groups. A head gate, squeeze, tilt table, and/or scale can be useful for additional animal control and for management considerations.

Although the complexity of handling systems vary, safe and effective facilities will have several features in common, including:

- Non-slip flooring
- Designed and properly sized for sheep
- Maintained in good condition with no sharp edges that may cause injuries and no gaps large enough to catch feet/legs or be seen by sheep as an exit
- Designed and set-up with sheep behaviour in mind, for example:

Behaviour/Characteristic	Handling System Feature
Sheep feel safest with other sheep. They are highly motivated to move with the flock and will follow the sheep ahead of them.	Gathering and crowding pens narrow gradually and have curved sides to take advantage of following behaviour. There are no corners to stop forward movement or sharp turns that block the view of the sheep ahead.
Sudden movements, changes in lighting, and unfamiliar objects will cause sheep to become fearful and/or balk	Be aware of light-to-dark transitions, and other visual distractions, such as shadows, breaks in flooring and unfamiliar or threatening items like objects on fences. Outer walls with solid sides will limit distractions.
As prey animals, being singled out, caught and held can be extremely stressful for sheep.	Duration, frequency and degree of physical contact are minimized by using sorting gates, squeeze chutes, radio frequency ID systems, etc.

Chute Photo Credit: THagedorn AARD

UNDERSTANDING SHEEP BEHAVIOUR

Understanding sheep behaviour is equally important to the physical components of handling systems. Consider the following tips for low-stress handling:

- Be prepared before starting a handling session. Have everything you need and develop a plan to minimize the frequency and duration of restraint.
- Moving too closely and too quickly will cause sheep to panic. By moving in-and-out of the flight zone* and using the point of balance** handlers can calmly control sheep movement (Figure 1).
- Do not continue to push sheep that have nowhere to go because lead sheep are balking: stop and find out what is causing the problem.
- Work quietly: loud noises (e.g. shouting, barking dogs) may disorientate sheep causing balking.
- Sheep will remember situations (and even individual handlers) that have caused stress or injury. By always moving sheep calmly, quietly, and with as little stress as possible, handling will be easier in the future.
- If using dogs, ensure they are well-trained and consider limiting their use in confined areas.
- Never use electric prods to move sheep.



Photo Credit: THagedorn AARD

Figure 1: Sheep maintain distance from handlers and calmly move forward as handler passes their 'point of balance'. Handlers at the back of the flock wait until the lead sheep are moving before applying pressure.

*The flight zone is an animal's 'personal space'. Sheep will move away if a handler enters the flight zone. The size of the zone will vary depending on the tameness of an animal.

**The point of balance is typically near the animal's shoulder. Moving ahead of the point of balance (towards the head) will cause the animal to stop or turn back. Moving behind the point of balance will make the animal move forward.

WHERE TO FIND SHEEP HANDLING SYSTEMS IN ALBERTA

Whether you buy a new or used handling system, or decide to build your own, will depend on your individual needs. Visit www.ablamb.ca for a current list of suppliers, design plans, and links to low-stress handling tips.

Growing Forward 2 can provide financial support to producers making improvements to animal welfare, including improved handling. Visit www.growingforward.alberta.ca or call the Alberta Ag Info line at 310-FARM for more information about producer grants.

The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep includes industry-accepted standards and legal requirements for sheep handling and handling systems. Visit www.nfacc.ca/pdfs/codes/sheep_code_of_practice.pdf to download your copy. For those without Internet access, contact the ALP office.

Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC) is our province's industry-driven livestock welfare advocacy organization. Visit www.afac.ab.ca for more information.