

Lambs Provide Hands-On Experience in Ag Course

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LAMBS PROVIDE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE IN AG COURSE

Students in Dr. John Olthoff's Beef and Sheep Science course don't have to buy a textbook, but they do need to invest in feeder lambs.

Each student pays \$50 toward the purchase of weaned lambs, and that investment is supplemented by a bank loan. Throughout the semester, students apply what they learn about beef and sheep breeding, genetics, nutrition, and health as they care for and prepare the sheep for market.

"At the beginning of class, they meet with the banker to set up a livestock loan for the project," says Olthoff, professor of agriculture. "This gives them a bankers' perspective on the enterprise and what they are looking for from their investors." The loan, supplemented by the \$50 personal contribution required of each student, allows students to purchase about 50 lambs from South Dakota.



John Olthoff

Once the lambs arrive, students are responsible for getting lamb finisher rations from a local feed mill. In the process, they evaluate whether those rations meet nutrient requirements. They also work with a local veterinarian on vaccination and parasite control programs.

"The students do the work, which includes daily checks for feed, water, and health," adds Olthoff. "They also monitor performance and make other

management decisions, like whether they should be shorn. And, eventually, they contact the lamb buyer to sell the finished lambs."

Katia Sytsma, a junior animal science major, has cared for cattle but not for lambs. "This project is one of the most exciting aspects of the class," says Sytsma. "We get to give the lambs their vaccines, check weights, run wool tests, and more, which gives us hands-on experience that you cannot get from a textbook."

"We have worked out assigning everyone daily chores throughout the time the lambs are housed at the farm," says Emma Zwart, also a junior majoring in animal science. "Each person signs up for three days to check the lambs. The lambs are on a self-feeder and automatic waterers. Each day a student goes out and makes sure the waterer is clean, the feeder has feed in it, and the lambs are all healthy. If there are any issues, we report them to Dr. Olthoff or Ag Stewardship Center Steward Mike Schouten, who will instruct us about whether further action is needed."

When the lambs are sold, the money pays off the bank loan, and whatever is left is divided among the class members. If the year is profitable, students get more than their \$50 investment back; if it

isn't profitable, they may lose their \$50.

"Of all the years this has been done, only one came with a loss of about \$10 per person; most have been break-even or slightly profitable," says Olthoff. Profits over the years have ranged from \$10 to \$100 per person—students this fall saw an \$85 profit. While profit is always appreciated, the purpose of having students invest some of their own funds is to help them experience the potential risks of livestock enterprises. "They find that death losses are very costly, so keeping animals alive and healthy is extremely important."

Olthoff has been teaching the course since 1991 and has included the feeder lambs project since 2003. Students also care for beef cattle at the farm, giving them vaccinations and pregnancy checking. "It's a great experience," says Sytsma.

"I enjoy these production courses because they allow for application of principles that are covered in other classes," Olthoff says. "It provides hands-on experiences and involvement with people in the community who participate directly in those production systems."

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