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# TMR for Sheep

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in the green*



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## Feed mixer putting positive spin on sheep farm's growth potential

After growing up on a farm, Joel Hamming admits he is betting big on his return to agriculture after nearly 20 years.

But if leaving his own lucrative construction business and personally putting his finances on the line in his Long Creek sheep farm sounds like a huge gamble, Hamming says it really comes down to growth and efficiency.

"I made at least five business plans getting ready for this and the conclusion was always the same," he says. "The faster I grow the operation, the faster I can become profitable."

“ *It's like growing any crop now, you talk to the experts because you can't know everything,* - Joel Hamming ”

To do that, he is using lights in his meat lamb operation to coax his ewes to lamb every 8 months instead of once a year. That accelerated production makes feed a top priority.

"In this kind of accelerated system, where you are tricking them a little bit to lamb more often, you need to keep the food in front of them because you are demanding a lot from them," Hamming says. "And you want them to maintain the right amount of body condition."

It explains why he has what is essentially a more than two-metre-high food processor on his 400-ewe farm.

Every day, Hamming uses a front-end loader tractor to drop 1,200 kilograms of hay, oats and field peas, 100 kilograms of barley, wheat and soybeans and assorted minerals and nutrients into his Trioliet Solomix mixer. The ingredients are part of a calculated, lab-tested mix that balances protein, energy, and other nutrients.

Inside, a blade powered by the tractor slices and mixes the ingredients into a uniform shredded feed, known as total mixed ration (TMR), that ensures that his sheep are eating what they need to eat.

Since buying the mixer in March with some assistance from the Agriculture Research and Innovation Program under the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership, Hamming has seen his feed waste drop by almost 10 per cent.

"It is a lot easier to manage the feed inputs and track how much they are getting," he says. "Sheep are very good at sorting and leaving stuff that you constantly have to clean out of their feed bunk."

"You also have bullies of the pen who want to take all the good stuff for themselves. When the feed is chopped and mixed, you can eliminate that."

Just by reducing feed waste, Hamming says he will save thousands of dollars a year. And while it is still too early to tell, he expects the mixed feed will also pay dividends in meat quality and herd health.



Joel Hamming with some of his sheep at his Long Creek sheep farm. Hamming left his construction business to return to farming and says the assistance he's received under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership's Agriculture Research and Innovation Program is helping him use total mixed ration (TMR) feed to accelerate the farm growth he needs to be competitive.

"I pay a lot of attention to feed because I know it pays off," he says. "Our mixes are tested in the lab and the formula is based on input from nutritionists, livestock experts from the provincial government and from things I've learned.

"It's like growing any crop now, you talk to the experts because you can't know everything. That's why the experts are there."

Hamming is currently growing most of his own feed, including 50 acres of hay, 40 acres of oatlage and peas, and 20 acres of corn silage, although tropical storm Fiona has him scrambling to replace the corn.

The feed mix is carefully tailored to the growth cycle of the lambs. There are separate feed formulas leading up to breeding, a pre-lamb ration for ewes in the month before they give birth and a lactation formulation that delivers an extra boost of energy and nutrients for the new mothers and their lambs.

In Hamming's production system, lambing is staggered over three periods – November, March and August.

On top of the production benefits of carefully managed feed, Hamming says the mixer also gives him more time for other tasks.

**“ You can take the boy off the farm but you can't take the farm out of the boy, ”**

- Joel Hamming

"Part of the business plan was figuring out how much time was needed to feed 400 ewes twice a day," he says. "There's a lot of labour involved in pulling apart bales by hand. While the TMR machine does its thing, I can be doing other things on the farm."

Hamming currently sends his lambs to abattoirs in Nova Scotia and says the market is strong.



Joel Hamming shows some of the total mix ration feed mix made by his Trioliet Solomix mixer. Hamming purchased the mixer for his Long Creek sheep farm this year with assistance from the Agriculture Research and Innovation Program under the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

"I'm a businessman, and farming has to be financially feasible for me, not just a hobby. I looked into sheep and discovered there is a good Canadian market for lamb, with 60 per cent being imported to fill demand."

Hamming has long-term plans to build his heard to more than 600 ewes.

It's a long way from his teenage years when he was dead set against the idea of taking over the family hog farm.

"I don't know if it was me just being a teenager, but I didn't want to be a hog farmer. It was just too much. I left the farm, my father got out of the hog business, and I went into construction."

Hamming eventually set up his own construction company, met his wife, who also grew up on a farm, and settled into a non-farming life.

Then his wife got a horse, which led to boarding horses, and suddenly he was thinking about agriculture again.

"There's the saying that you can take the boy off the farm but you can't take the farm out of the boy. Between the horses and the idea of wanting our kids to grow up on a farm, the longing was there and there was a couple of years of just trying to figure out how to do it."

A decision to buy a tractor led to a visit to the salesman's sheep farm. Hamming was hooked.

Living on his dad's farm, he bought 50 ewes in the summer of 2021 and the farm has been growing ever since.

While he has invested heavily in the sheep operation – "I'm mortgaged to the hilt," he says with a rueful laugh – he says programs under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership are appreciated.

In addition to the Trioliet feed mixer, Hamming has received some assistance from the Agriculture Research and Innovation Program for a milk feeder and a sheep handling system.

He is also in the second year of the Future Farmer Program, which has helped with the purchase of a seed drill.

"Every little bit helps," he says. "I know the intention of government is to help get people into farming and I appreciate that.

"Sometimes you wonder if the public appreciates how much is involved in farming. But this is where I want to be."

"They spend up to 40 hours a week deboning with a knife, and they have a good eye for the task," he says. "They are pretty amazed and impressed to see what more can come off."