



What's At Stake?

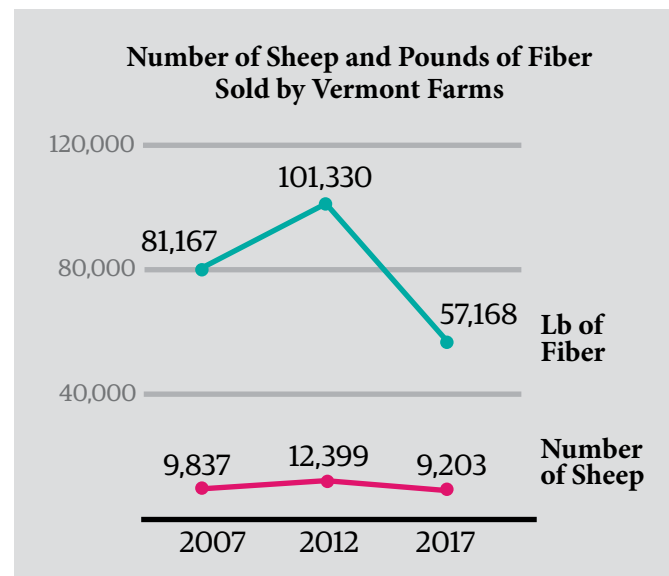
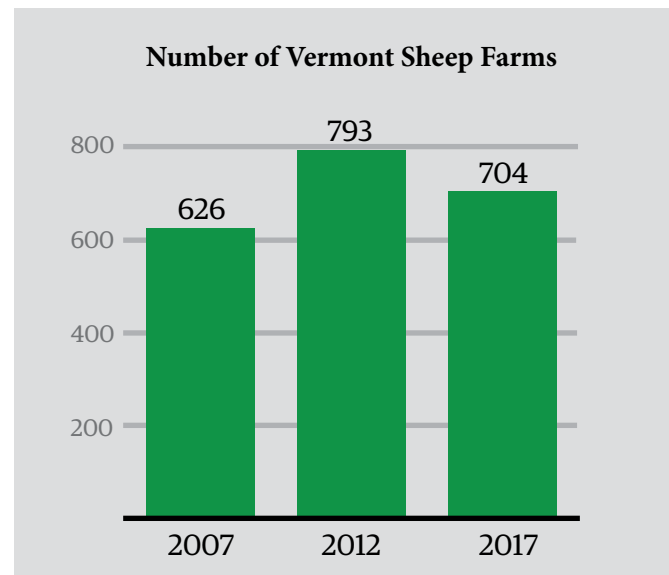
Sheep and their products—meat, milk, and fiber—were Vermont’s first agricultural commodity and still have a significant role to play in the state’s landscape. These small ruminants can take full advantage of Vermont’s unruly topography and mixed vegetation in a way larger animals cannot. Currently, raw sheep products are imported into the state to meet demand for value-added processing, a sure signal that there is room for growth. For example, slaughterhouses import lamb for retail, cheese makers import milk for unique artisanal blend cheeses, and fine western fiber is blended with coarser local fiber in production manufacturing of soft yarns. With comparatively low capital investment requirements, starting up a sheep operation can be an attractive agricultural endeavor.

Current Conditions

The number of sheep farms in Vermont and much of the United States dropped precipitously in the 1990s when wool, the most lucrative revenue source for sheep producers, lost value against synthetic textiles.¹ Some boutique cottage industries developed (e.g, specialty yarns, Christmas stockings, rugs), as did service industries supporting them. A small percentage of the fleece “clip” is a fine, soft fiber and is directed to cottage industries. The majority of the fleece produced in Vermont, however, is coarse, and better utilized for more industrial-type purposes, although there is no large-scale processing in the state for it. Many Vermont sheep farmers have turned to meat and dairy as a money-making opportunity.

As of 2017, Vermont had approximately 704 operations.² Most (88%) tend to be operations with fewer than 50 animals, serving a local market.³ Scaled-up Vermont operations of greater than 100 head, producing lamb and/or milk for cheese, are typically profitable when they fully incorporate good grazing management.

Since 1995, sheep dairies have enjoyed growing consumer demand for artisanal cheese, creating several jobs in that sector, and creating a market for sheep milk. However, part of that sheep milk is now imported from out-of-state dairies that have converted from milking cows. The lamb market has also grown, as lamb occupies a niche in certain consumer markets. However, issues with slaughter and processing facilities continue to be a significant obstacle (see *Meat: Slaughter, Processing, and Products* brief.)⁴



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Challenges with slaughtering and processing sheep meat in Vermont include limited facilities, seasonality of supply, inconsistent product quality, labor shortages and skill gaps, and facilities' reluctance to process lamb due to their higher cost relative to cattle and pigs, and having to deal with sheepskins, which often become a waste product (see *Meat: Slaughter, Processing, and Products* brief).
- Limited access to scouring facilities, for cleaning fiber for value-added goods, severely limits any exploration and development of new products.
- Getting products to market remains cumbersome for most sheep producers. For most producers, the burden of seeing their product through from pasture to cheese shop, meat shelf, yarn store, or rug shop remains solely their responsibility. It is a lengthy and quirky process and requires constant attention to detail and strong relationships with retail buyers (who change frequently).

Opportunities

- Sheep can easily regenerate or maintain marginal land without much need for amendments, meanwhile cycling nutrients, improving the soil, sequestering carbon in both the soil and their fleece, and providing meat, milk, and/or fiber for consumption.
- Sheep combine easily for complementary grazing with horses, chickens, and cattle, maximizing efficiency in land utilization.
- Sheep are perfect “starter” animals, as required finances are much less than what cattle require in terms of animal purchase price, infrastructure needs, real estate, and stored feed requirements.
- There is growing demand for contract grazing for town greens and underneath solar arrays, and control of invasive plants on both private and public venues.
- The coarser fiber produced by sheep in the Northeast has great potential as a locally produced plant fertilizer.⁵

Recommendations

- Encourage or incentivize utilities to collaborate with sheep producers, for maintenance mowing underneath solar arrays.
- Encourage or incentivize towns, government entities, and private landowners to utilize sheep producers for land maintenance. This could be done via payment for ecosystem services or carbon payments, for example.
- Working with existing fertilizer or compost companies, develop a new market for the coarse wool of Vermont by encouraging and incentivizing the use of locally produced wool pellets for fertilizer. This would use enormous amounts of wool, and provide a revenue stream for sheep producers. A cost assessment is needed to determine viability.
- The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets could devise a market-based solution to relieve the autumn slaughter scheduling bottleneck. For example, promote September to January as the “Season of Vermont lamb” and help restaurants (both in-state and out-of-state) promote lamb utilization in menu development. Costs would need to be studied.
- Continue funding support for larger, more expensive sheep infrastructure equipment such as fencing, chargers, water systems, and livestock chutes. Sheep profit margins remain small in comparison to the costs of larger-scale operational improvements, and existing programs for infrastructure improvement support have made a big impact on producers starting up and/or trying to improve their operations.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFMM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

This brief was prepared by:

Lead Author: Kimberly Hagen, *UVM Extension*

Contributing Authors: Bay Hammond and Dave Martin, *Vermont Sheep and Goat Association Board Members* | David Major, *Vermont Shepherd* | David Ritchie, *Green Mountain Spinnery* | Jascha Pick, *Sheep Meadow Farm* | Bruce Howlett and Carol Dickson, *Bobolink Farm*.

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