

Tips for Selling Sheep and Goats Through Public Livestock Auctions

by Susan Schoenian
Sheep & Goat Specialist
Western Maryland Research & Education Center
University of Maryland Cooperative Extension
sschoen@umd.edu - www.sheepandgoat.com

According to a 2001 NAHMS study, 56.8 percent of sheep operators sell their lambs through auction markets/sale barns. This percentage is probably higher in the Eastern U.S., where direct sales to packers and feeders are less common. For example, a 2003 study showed that 73.5 percent of West Virginia sheep producers market their lambs through livestock auctions. The percentages of goats sold at livestock auctions is probably similar, though a higher percentage of goats may be slaughtered on-farm.

There are many advantages to marketing livestock through a public livestock auction, sale barn, or stockyard. It is convenient and easy. There are usually regular weekly sales. Sometimes, there are special graded sales or sales that cater to the increased demand for sheep and goats prior to various religious holidays.

When you sell at a stockyard, you get prompt payment, and your payment is protected by the Packers and Stockyards Act. Public auctions are an ideal place for "price discovery." Price discovery is the process of determining the price level of a commodity based on supply and demand factors. Price discovery is public. It needs to occur somewhere and is often what many direct sales are based upon.

There are also various disadvantages for this marketing option. You do not know what price you are going to receive before-hand. You are subject to wide fluctuations in the market. You have little control over price. This is why farmers are often called "price-takers." Sales commissions can be high, especially if you are selling light weight lambs or kids. Depending upon the location of the auction, shrink and transportation costs could be substantial. This marketing option can be very stressful to the livestock. Sale barns are usually not the best place to purchase breeding stock, due to the potential disease risks.

Here are some tips for maximizing your returns when taking sheep and/or goats to a livestock auction/stockyard:

- Consider the major Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holidays when marketing sheep and goats.

- Eid ul-Adha or the "Festival of Sacrifice," a Muslim holiday, is usually the best time to place sheep and goats in the market place.
- Eid ul-Fidr or the "Festival of Fast-breaking" follows the month of Ramadan and is another good time to sell sheep and goats.
- Easter is obviously an important holiday for marketing lamb and goat. There is usually a greater demand at Greek or Eastern Orthodox Easter as compared to Western or Roman Easter.
- Minor holidays (e.g. Mother's Day, 4th of July, etc.) can also be a good time to sell sheep and goats.
- When targeting a holiday, put your livestock into the market place at least one week before the holiday.
- Do not castrate males, especially bucks, unless you have to. Intact males grow faster and more efficiently. They are preferred by many ethnic buyers. A wether is a blemished animal.
- Do not dock lambs unless you have to. Tails sell for the same price as the rest of the lamb. Many ethnic buyers prefer tailed lambs. A docked lamb is a blemished lamb.
- Do not sell animals with dirty butts or hocks. They will be considered unhealthy by the buyers, even if the soiled parts are dry.
- Consider shearing sheep/lambs that are neither too fat nor too thin. They look better to buyers.
- Consider color when breeding meat goats. Colored goats are often preferred by ethnic buyers. Solid-white goats are less desired. A goat with a brown/dark head usually brings more money because it is presumed to have Boer breeding.
- There is as much difference among breeds as between breeds. Some breeds or types may sell at a discount until buyers learn more about them. Short-eared goats (i.e. La Mancha) may sell at a discount because their lack of ears makes them appear blemished to ethnic buyers.
- When selling suckling lambs or kids, sell them directly off their dams. If you wean them, they will lose their "bloom."
- Consider body condition of cull animals. Overly fat and thin animals will bring less money.
- Learn how to mouth sheep and goats. If you have a big lamb or kid, make sure you mark it and it gets sold as a lamb or kid, not a mature animal (especially lambs).
- Mark your animals according to how you want them sorted and sold.
- Desired market weights and condition vary. Traditional lamb markets (in the Eastern U.S.) use to favor a 95 to 125 lb. Choice or Blue-O lamb. The ethnic markets tend to prefer leaner, lighter lambs, e.g. 80 to 100 lbs. In the case of goats, a market weight of 60 to 80 lbs. is usually very desirable for the ethnic market. Even lighter lambs and kids are preferred for different holidays and by different ethnic groups. Sometimes, bigger, older animals are desired by ethnic buyers.
- Consider selling sheep and goats when reported prices are low. There will be fewer animals marketed at the next sale, and prices may be

- higher. When everyone markets their animals in response to high reported market prices, there is often an oversupply of lambs and goats in the market place, which drives prices lower.
- Do not just drop your animals off at the sale barn. Follow them to make sure they are given feed and water and placed in a clean, uncrowded pen.
 - Do not bring your animals to the stockyard at the last minute. They will probably be sold near the end of the sale, possibly at lower prices.
 - Consider total marketing costs when trying to decide between different local and regional auctions. Higher prices at regional markets may be offset by higher shrink (weight loss during transportation), higher transportations costs, and higher commissions. On the other hand, price gaps between local and regional markets may be large enough to justify the additional marketing costs. Many animals that are purchased at local sale barns are often transported to regional or terminal markets and re-sold for higher prices.
 - Follow market reports, but do not consider the information contained in them to be absolute. Market reports can contain bias and various inaccuracies. They are a good indicator of general trends in the market place.
 - Collectively, goat producers need to demand that goats be sold by weight, as is common with all other livestock. If an individual producer makes this request, his/her animals may be discriminated against, which is why this needs to be a collective/industry decision.
 - Good quality goats will bring more if they are sold by grade and weight. This may not be the case with poorer quality animals.
 - Know what your goats weigh so you will know what price you received, in situations where goats are sold on a per-head basis.
 - Consider breeding sheep and goats out-of-season. Suckling lambs and kids sold at Easter and Christmas time, when few new crop lambs/kids are available, sometimes sell for very high prices.
 - When selling to local auctions, call the market manager to find out what prices are. Get to know the market managers at the auctions where you plan to take lambs/goats.
 - Take pride in the lambs and kids you take to the sale barn. Sit through various sheep and goat sales to learn what the buyers want and are willing to pay a premium price for. Get to know the buyers. Find out what they think of your animals. A good reputation helps to sell livestock.

Dr. Robert "Bob" Herr is a frequent speaker at sheep and goat meetings. Bob operates Nix Besser Livestock Company in Narvon, Pennsylvania. He is a livestock dealer and order buyer of sheep and goats at the New Holland Sales Stables. He also raises sheep and meat goats. Most of the suggestions in this article are from Bob's talks to producer groups.