

## **Lean bodies make Texels desired lamb**

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### Lean Bodies Make Texels Desired Lamb

Five years ago in late April, Mike Wallace arrive in New York and went to work loading 20 pregnant ewes on a truck bound for Clay Center, Nebraska, and the ARS U.S. Meat Animal Research Center.

Imported from Finland, the ewes were supposed to give birth after they arrived at the ARS facility. But Wallace recalls that there was a 30-day delay in handling the importation. The experience sticks in his memory because during the 34-hour ride from USDA's New York Animal Import Center in Rock Tavern, New York, he delivered two sets of twins and a single lamb.

Delivering lambs wasn't a new experience for the 12-year veteran sheep operations manager at MARC, but doing it in a moving truck was.

Texels were the first sheep imported from Europe to the United States since Finnsheep were imported in the 1960's. The sale of the Texels marked the first release of germplasm in the United States to sheep producers.

Wallace says he felt a good deal of satisfaction when some of the Texels were sold recently for breeding stock during the MARC's annual sheep sale. "A lot of people worked hard to get Texels into this country and to set up the 5-year quarantine program."

The Texels were quarantined since 1985 to ensure they didn't have scrapie - a debilitating brain disease that causes eventual death. Although only a small number of sheep have been diagnosed with scrapie in the United States, its prevention requires strict quarantine procedures for all animals imported from Europe.

Once the Texel ewes, rams, and lambs had their feet down at MARC, ARS animal geneticist Kreg A. Leymaster began an experiment to evaluate the Texels as a potential terminal sire breed.

"All lambs from a terminal sire breed are intended for slaughter," Leymaster says, "so breeders focus on growth rate and carcass leanness.

"The Texels were known for their ability to produce lean, meaty carcasses," says Leymaster. "And we wanted to see how the Texels compared to the Suffolks, a U.S. breed also known for its efficient, lean growth rate.

"Initially, we saw little difference in growth between the Suffolks and the Texels. After 9 weeks of age, Suffolk were producing lean and fat more rapidly than Texels but in a similar ratio. Lambs are usually sold at 115 to 120 pounds - when they are 6 to 9 months old.

The Texels' strength is their ability to achieve low fat content relative to their intermediate growth rate and mature size. Texel and Suffolk carcasses had the same fat content when compared at a common carcass weight.

Preliminary studies indicate that the Texels are competitive with Suffolks. But the Texels had an edge because more Texel lambs survived to weaning. The Texels had 89 percent survival compared to 81 percent for Suffolk lambs. The Texels had a birthrate of 1.8 offspring per mature ewe, which is slightly higher than that of many breeds in the United States.

The MARC studies were undertaken to evaluate the merits of the Texel breed for U.S. sheep production. In addition, the information about U.S. Suffolks is now available for other countries that may consider importing them. "Either way, the U.S. sheep industry should benefit," says Leymaster. - By Linda Cooke, ARS.

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