2026 Dakota Feeder Lamb Report – Final Report

The Dakota Feeder Lamb Project was established to provide sheep producers with objective performance and carcass data to support genetic selection for improving the market value of feeder lambs. By evaluating sire-grouped progeny under standardized feeding and management conditions, the project aimed to provide producers with an opportunity to better understand differences in growth performance, carcass characteristics, and progeny uniformity.

In 2026, the project evaluated 33 feeder lambs representing seven sire groups from five consignors. Lambs were divided into two feeding groups based on age: five winter-born lambs completed a 60-day finishing trial, while 28 spring-born lambs completed a 90-day finishing trial. Throughout the feeding period, individual body weights and live-animal ultrasound measurements were collected to evaluate growth and carcass development. At the conclusion of each trial, lambs were harvested to collect actual carcass measurements, USDA quality and yield grades, and carcass value estimates. Individual animal performance and sire-group summaries were developed to provide participating producers with information to guide future breeding, selection, and marketing decisions.

The 2026 evaluation generated individual lamb records and sire-group summaries across four primary areas:

- **Growth Performance:** Initial and final body weights, total weight gain, average daily gain (ADG), and weight per day of age (WDA) were evaluated to characterize lamb growth during the finishing period.
- **Carcass Merit:** Live-animal ultrasound and harvested carcass measurements were used to evaluate muscling, fat deposition, hot carcass weight, dressing percentage, and estimated boneless, closely trimmed retail cuts (%BCTRC).
- **Carcass Quality and Value:** USDA quality and yield grades, retail product estimates, and calculated carcass values were used to characterize carcass desirability and potential economic differences among lambs.
- **Progeny Uniformity:** Sire-group means, standard deviations (SD), and coefficients of variation (CV) were calculated to evaluate the consistency of growth and carcass characteristics among lambs within each sire-group.

The resulting information is presented in a comprehensive sire-grouped summary and individualized consignor reports.

RESULTS: The 2026 Dakota Feeder Lamb Project identified variation in growth performance, carcass merit, estimated economic value, and progeny uniformity among the evaluated sire groups. Differences in finishing-period growth did not consistently correspond with differences in carcass muscling, composition, or value, reinforcing the benefit of considering these traits together when evaluating progeny.

- **Growth Performance:** Among spring-born sire groups, average daily gain (ADG) ranged from 0.55 to 0.68 lb/day, while weight per day of age (WDA) ranged from approximately 0.53 to 0.72 lb/day. The spring-born division averaged 0.61 lb/day ADG.

Variation between ADG and WDA indicates that growth during the finishing period did not consistently parallel growth relative to age; differences in pretrial development and maturity may have contributed. The winter-born group averaged 0.65 lb/day ADG during its concurrent 60-day trial.

- **Carcass Merit:** Carcass measurements revealed differences in muscling, fat deposition, and estimated retail yield that were not consistently reflected in growth performance. Among spring-born sire groups, mean ribeye area ranged from approximately 1.98 to 3.17 sq. in., while estimated boneless, closely trimmed retail cuts (%BCTRC) ranged from approximately 46.7% to 48.6%. Average hot carcass weights ranged from 45.6 to 57.2 lb. These findings demonstrate that comparable growth rates can produce different carcass outcomes and support the inclusion of harvested carcass measurements in progeny evaluation.
- **Carcass Quality and Value:** Mean calculated carcass value among spring-born sire groups ranged from $164.87 to $209.95 per head, a difference of $45.08. Estimated retail product ranged from approximately 21.7 to 27.7 lb per carcass. Differences in carcass weight and composition contributed to variation in calculated value, with implications for producers marketing lambs on carcass characteristics or selling retail cuts directly to consumers.
- **Progeny Uniformity:** Variation among progeny differed across growth and carcass traits. Among spring-born sire groups, ADG coefficients of variation (CV) ranged from 5.38% to 15.27%. Carcass value CV from the individual carcass values yielded approximately 2.47% to 16.45% among spring-born groups. These results emphasize the importance of examining both sire-group averages and within-group consistency, particularly when evaluating lambs for uniform marketing endpoints. Because groups contained only four or five lambs, CV estimates are sensitive to individual observations and should be interpreted cautiously.

Overall Implications: The 2026 results reinforce the value of integrating finishing performance, harvested carcass measurements, and progeny uniformity in sire-group evaluation. Variation in carcass muscling, retail yield, and estimated value was not fully captured by live-animal growth measurements alone. Although small progeny groups representing multiple breeds and differing pretrial histories limit conclusions about genetic merit, the project provides consignors with objective records to inform breeding and marketing decisions. Continued evaluation across additional progeny and production years will help determine whether the observed performance patterns are repeatable.

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