Expert tips for emerging sheep farmers

By Octavia Avesca Spandiel

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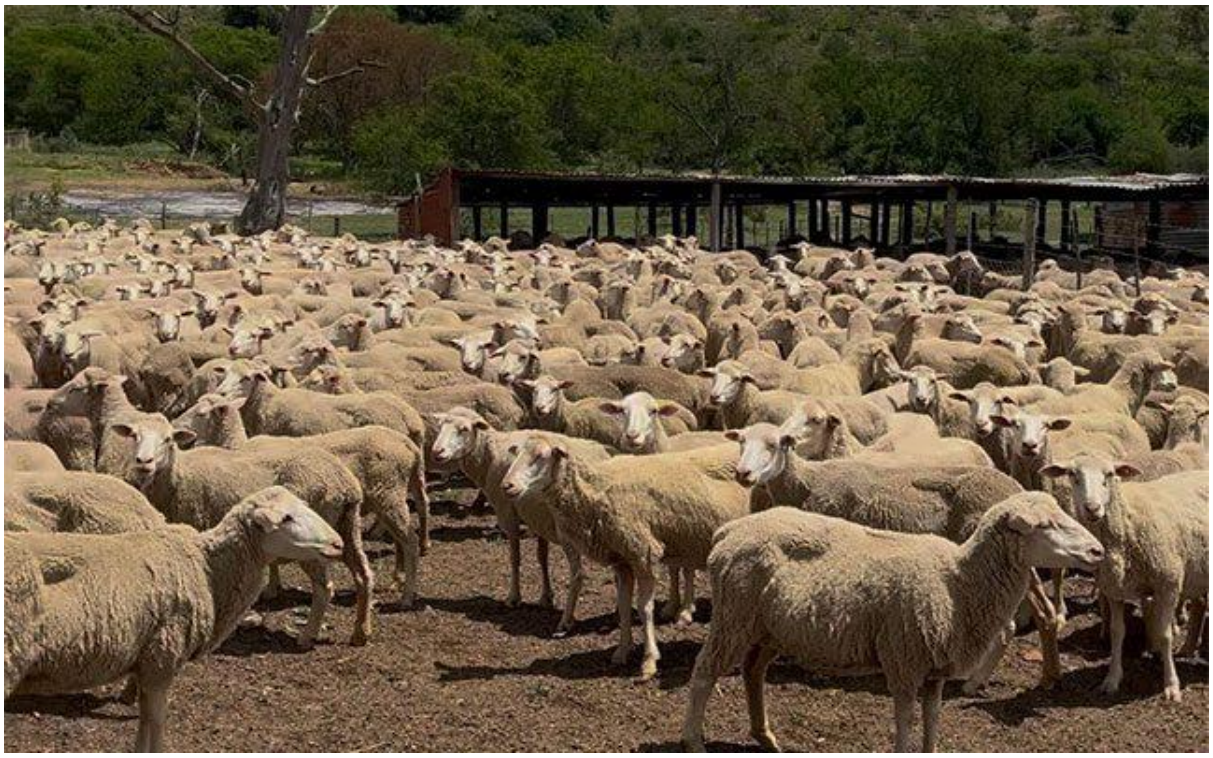
Emerging sheep farmers can boost their production and profitability by focusing on quality over quantity. Willem Goosen, production adviser at the National Wool Growers' Association, spoke to Octavia Avesca Spandiel about strategies for breeding productive animals and managing them effectively.



The National Wool Growers' Association is working with stakeholders to promote climate-resilient practices.
Photo: Octavia Avesca Spandiel

Efficient sheep production starts with making smart decisions – from selecting productive animals and managing grazing to balancing wool and meat output.

Willem Goosen, production adviser at the National Wool Growers' Association (NWGA) in the Eastern Cape, says emerging farmers can thrive by focusing on quality over quantity.

For sheep farmers working on limited land, especially in communal areas, making the most of each animal is essential. Instead of increasing flock size, the real gains come from improving flock quality.

Goosen says identifying and replacing non-productive sheep with high-yielding animals can significantly boost a farmer's income. **Maximising productivity with limited resources**

"From better wool yields to additional meat production, strategic breeding and proper herd management can transform small-scale operations into profitable ventures," he says.

Goosen points out that one of the most effective ways to supplement feed during periods of drought or low grazing is to make use of crops planted during the summer season.

"In summer, most communal farmers have a piece of land where they normally grow oats or maize. At the end of April or May, they harvest the maize and use it in their own households, and the rest they feed to their animals in winter," he says.

Goosen adds that the maize cobs are bagged and stored in garages or sheds, while the stover left in the fields is grazed down by cattle.

"The maize that is harvested is mostly for small stock like sheep and goats, if necessary. The rest will be utilised by cattle," he says.

When it comes to cost-effective feeding strategies, Goosen encourages farmers to buy feed in bulk during the summer months, when prices are lower.

"If they can buy grass or lucerne bales during summer – any time from November to the middle of April – they'll save money.

"Lucerne bales normally cost between R70 and R90 [each]. In winter, those same bales sell for R150 [each]. So, they pay nearly double the amount if they don't plan properly," he adds.

Goosen says that preparation is important: "Harvest your maize at the beginning of winter to use during the winter and dry months. A farmer can purchase bales of lucerne in summer. It's very good for protein, and you can mix it with maize to give a bit of roughage if there's nothing else to eat."

Beyond feeding, lambing management is also a critical aspect that can make or break a smallholder's operation.

Goosen says many farmers still depend on natural mating cycles, which often result in lambs being born in the middle of winter – the harshest time of the year.

"At the moment, it's like natural mating. As soon as the rain comes in November, December and January, the ewes are picking up weight and they mate with the rams. The lambs are born in June or July. But then August is so dry, causing a lot of lambs to die," he says.

Effective breeding and feeding strategies

To improve survival rates, Goosen recommends a more structured breeding calendar. “We advise that farmers move their mating to the end of April or May, so that the lambs are born in October or November when the rains have come and the veld is green.

“In winter, they burn all the dead grass, and when the first rains come, the burnt veld starts shooting – it’s always green. That’s the ideal time for lambing,” he says.

Green veld after first rains provides good nutrition for lactating ewes and lambs.

By having a lambing programme and management plan and preparing feed well in advance, Goosen believes emerging and communal farmers can significantly reduce their losses and improve the overall productivity of their flocks.

Even on small plots of communal grazing land, better management and selective breeding can make a big difference.

Goosen says that not all farmers in communal areas own land, and they rely on herders who move the flocks daily in search of the best grazing. The reason why they follow this approach is that there is no infrastructure like fencing or camps.

“Planning is everything. With the right strategies in place, communal wool growers can thrive even through the toughest seasons,” he says.

Goosen also mentions that one of the earliest and most telling signs of nutritional deficiencies in sheep is evident in the condition of lambs.

“The first sign, if you look at the lambs, is that they are not getting enough food. The mothers have no feed to produce milk,” he says.

As a result, lambs often appear bloated and weak, struggling to keep up with the flock.

“They look bloated because of the lack of protein and food, and they develop runny stomachs,” he adds.

A more concerning issue arises when ewes, driven by hunger, abandon their lambs.

“The ewes are actually abandoning the lambs because they’re just chasing food. They can’t feed the lambs and themselves at the same time,” says Goosen.

Support for emerging farmers

In terms of support structures, Goosen says both government and private stakeholders run initiatives aimed at helping emerging sheep farmers improve their production.

“The Department of Agriculture has an animal improvement project where farmers can apply to receive superior rams. [The criteria are quite strict], but it’s a valuable way to improve flocks,” he explains.

The NWGA is also actively involved in flock improvement through partnerships and subsidised breeding programmes.

“The NWGA buys good-quality sheep for farmers who are willing to pay themselves. That is how we improve their flocks,” says Goosen.

He says better-quality animals not only result in stronger lambs, but also yield more wool, ultimately boosting farm incomes.

“At the moment, we’re focusing on wool production. By increasing kilograms of wool, there’s more money in the farmer’s pocket; that’s why we emphasise buying quality animals that can give us a good price on the market,” he says.

While animal genetics and feed strategies are essential, Goosen admits that infrastructure remains a hurdle for many emerging producers.

“Infrastructure is one of the most difficult issues for emerging farmers just starting out,” he says. The NWGA’s infrastructure focus has been on equipping farmers with functional shearing sheds and facilities that support wool processing.

“The Department of Agriculture and some municipalities are building sheds, fully equipped with yards and everything for the farmers. But farmers have to apply and meet certain criteria,” says Goosen.

Strategic breeding improves wool and meat outputs, even on small farms.

Improving flock quality for increased wool and meat yield

For small-scale farmers, interventions by government and other stakeholders can make a significant difference – not just in animal health and wool quality, but also in overall resilience and profitability.

“Everything we do is to strengthen the farmer’s ability to survive tough seasons and produce better quality animals and wool,” says Goosen.

On the issue of drought and climate change impacts, Goosen expresses concern over how prolonged dry spells in communal areas are threatening the sustainability of small-stock farming.

“Without proper grazing and nutrition, animals become more susceptible to disease, their reproductive performance drops, and ultimately, this affects the quality and quantity of wool,” he says.

He highlights that the NWGA is working with stakeholders to promote climate-resilient practices.

“We are encouraging veld management practices, such as rotational grazing and veld resting. We’re also starting to look at introducing drought-tolerant forage crops where possible, especially in drier areas of the Eastern Cape,” he says.

According to Goosen, emerging and communal farmers are working with sheep that each produces as little as 800g of wool annually.

“Those animals are using the same grazing resources as sheep that could be producing 2,5kg of wool per year. But the wool from the inferior ewe might fetch only R30/kg, while the wool from a quality ewe could earn anything from R80/kg to R110/kg,” he says.

Investing in better sheep for greater profit

Goosen adds that improving herd quality doesn’t only increase income from wool, but also from meat.

“You still have the carcass of a ewe’s ram lamb to sell as mutton, so the profit potential per ewe is much higher when she is producing both quality wool and a marketable lamb,” he says.

“We’ve seen that farmers who invest in quality animals actually make more money with fewer sheep. It’s about efficiency, not just numbers,” Goosen says.

He concludes that through the support of various organisations such as the NWGA, Cape Wools SA, wool brokers, animal health companies like Zoetis and various private and government stakeholders, emerging farmers are being equipped with the knowledge and tools to improve flock health, increase wool quality, and access better-paying markets.

“With practical training, partnerships with veterinary companies, and ongoing mentorship, the goal is clear: sustainable growth, one flock at a time,” he says.