



NEWS RELEASE



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Lamb industry requires further change, says American Lamb Summit

Outcomes from the inaugural American Lamb Summit were clear: all segments of the industry need to further improve lamb quality to keep and attract new customers and become more efficient to recapture market share from imported lamb. Yet, it was just as clear that production technologies and product research put industry success within grasp.

"I have never been so enthusiastic about our industry's opportunities, but we just can't allow ourselves to be complacent or accept status quo," said Dale Thorne, American Lamb Board chairman, a sheep producer and feeder from Michigan. Thorne stressed, "the end-game is profitability for all aspects of our industry."

The Summit, sponsored by the [American Lamb Board](#) (ALB) and [Premier 1 Supplies](#), brought together 200 sheep producers, feeders and packers from all over the country to Colorado State University (CSU) in Ft. Collins, CO, August 27-28, 2019.

The conference included in-depth, challenging discussions ranging from consumer expectations, business management tools, realistic production practices to improve productivity and American Lamb quality and consistency, to assessing lamb carcasses. Sessions were carefully planned so that attendees would gain tools for immediate implementation.

"We can't keep saying 'I'll think about it;' we have to realize that change is required for industry profitability," Thorne emphasized.

The [Lamb Checkoff Facebook page](#) features summary videos from the sessions and additional resources. The [Lamb Resource Center](#) is the hub for all Lamb Summit information, as it becomes available.

Consumers redefine quality

"Consumers are ours to win or lose," said Michael Uetz, managing principal of Midan Marketing. His extensive research with meat consumers shows that the definition of quality now goes beyond product characteristics, especially for Millennials and Generation Z's. "It now includes how the animal was raised, what it was fed, or not fed, impact on sustainability and influence on human health," Uetz said.

"Your power is in your story. You have a great one to tell about American Lamb," he advised.

Lamb production tools

Increasing flock productivity, using genetic selection, and collecting then using production and financial data were stressed as critical steps for on-farm improvements. “The best way to improve productivity is to increase the number of lambs per ewe,” said Reid Redden, PhD, sheep and goat specialist, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. “Pregnancy testing your ewes should be part of a producer’s routine. Not only can open ewes be culled, but ewes can be segmented for the number of lambs they are carrying for better allocation of feed,” he said.

While genetic selection is now common in beef, pork and both Australian and New Zealand sheep, the American Lamb industry’s slow adoption is hindering flock improvement and giving competition a definite advantage, said Rusty Burgett, Program Director, [National Sheep Improvement Program](#). The cattle industry offers an example with how it uses EPDs (expected progeny differences) to select for traits. “We can do the same with our tools, but we must get more sheep enrolled into the program,” said Tom Boyer, Utah sheep producer.

Carcass and meat quality

Understanding what leads to quality American Lamb on the plate means looking beyond the live animal to carcass quality, stressed Lamb Summit speakers involved in processing and foodservice.

Individual animal traceability is ultimately what is required to give consumers the transparency they are demanding, said Henry Zerby, PhD, Wendy’s Quality Supply Chain Co-op, Inc. A lamb producer himself, Zerby was straight-forward to the Summit participants: “Being able to track animals individually to know if they were ever given antibiotics, how they were raised, through the packer is on the horizon. We need to realize and prepare for that.” US lamb processors are implementing systems at various levels and offer programs for sheep producers.

Lamb flavor has been an industry topic for decades. Dale Woerner, PhD, Texas Tech University meat scientist, has been conducting research funded by ALB. He explained that flavor is a very complex topic, influenced by characteristics such as texture, aroma, cooking and handling of the product, and even emotional experience. “Lamb has more than one flavor profile, affected by feeding and other practices,” he explained. Summit participants tasted four different lamb samples, which illustrated Woerner’s points about various preferences and profiles.

“By sorting carcasses or cuts into flavor profile groups, we can direct that product to the best market,” he said. The American Lamb Board is currently in the final phase of lamb flavor research with Texas Tech University and Colorado State University identifying consumer preference of American Lamb and identifying those flavor profiles in the processing plant.

What's next

The Summit was designed to instill relevant, meaningful knowledge that can be implemented immediately to address both current and future needs. It also sought to inspire collaboration, networking and information sharing across all segments and geographic regions of the American Lamb industry.

"If we work together to implement progressive production changes throughout our supply chain, we can regain market share from imported product and supply our country with more great-tasting American Lamb," concluded ALB Chairman Thorne. ALB hopes that attendees left the Summit with multiple ideas to do just that.

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About the American Lamb Board

The American Lamb Board is an industry-funded national promotion, research and information organization (national checkoff program) that represents all sectors of the American Lamb industry including producers, feeders, seedstock producers, and processors. The 13-member Board, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, is focused on increasing demand by promoting the freshness, flavor, nutritional benefits, and culinary versatility of American Lamb. The work of the American Lamb Board is overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the board's programs are supported and implemented by the staff in Denver, Colorado.

The program is funded through mandatory assessments collected under the federally mandated Lamb Checkoff program. There is a live weight assessment of \$0.07 per pound paid by the seller of sheep or lambs and a first handler assessment of \$0.42 per head assessment paid by the entity who owns sheep or lambs at the time of slaughter. The assessments are remitted to the American Lamb Board. The Board's expenditures for administration are limited to 10 percent or less of projected revenues. All remaining revenues are expended on programs related to promotion, research and information for the lamb industry.

Accompanying photos with cutlines:



Henry Zerby, PhD, representing Wendy's Quality Supply Chain Co-op, Inc., explains carcass quality from a national foodservice perspective. (ASI photo)



Lamb Summit participants were challenged to select the "best" ram, without the benefit of genetic information. (ASI photo)