



WASHINGTON STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

## WASHINGTON STATE SHEARING SCHOOL

### BY THE NUMBERS

A 2014 long-term impact survey of former school attendees revealed:

- More than 80% of students are shearing sheep, goats, alpacas, and llamas for revenue.
- Students successfully completing the school are shearing both part and full time, with incomes ranging from \$200 a year to more than \$60,000.
- They provide services and education to more than 1,000 fiber operations.
- Combined, they shear more than 35,000 head annually.



### 2015 ISSUE

An increase in sheep profitability, the number of small farms, and the use of sheep for natural resource management has caused the number of sheep to rise nationally to more than 5.28 million head. Almost 10 percent of sheep raised in the United States, 507,000, are raised in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho because of the unique and diverse growing regions of the Pacific Northwest. Knowledgeable producers and a skilled workforce are essential for producer and industry sustainability, which requires outreach programs that support education, recruiting, training, and the retention of quality people.

Wool's popularity in the textile industry is growing because of the increased cost of synthetic fibers and the natural renewable properties of wool. People also want assurances that wool is ethically produced, harvested, and processed. Skilled and knowledgeable shearers are an integral part of harvesting wool in a manner that ensures the highest quality wool clip possible, proper animal handling, and biosecurity to prevent disease transmission.

Worldwide the sheep industry is facing a critical shearer shortage for flocks of all sizes. The serious shortage impacts timely harvest, sustainability of producers, and the well-being of the animals. It is not uncommon for small flocks to go unshorn or sell out because of the shortage. This situation compromises both the animals' well-being and long-term sustainability of the sheep industry. Producers of other fiber producing animals (alpacas, goats, and llamas) also have expressed a need for qualified shearers.

### RESPONSE

The Washington State Shearing School (WSSS) was created in 1977 to address the need for skilled sheep shearers, a need that is just as large today as it was almost 40 years ago. A five-day beginner's school and a one-day advanced school are held annually in April. The WSSS provides classroom and extensive hands-on training to ensure students develop skills and knowledge necessary to achieve an efficient, quality wool harvest and understand proper animal care.

To achieve a high-quality wool clip from farm to market place, producers, wool consultants, and wool pool coordinators are incorporated in the educational process. Shearing students also receive information on various sheep production-related issues and an extensive resource manual to provide sheep producers with additional information.



## QUOTES

"I have to admit I was a little bit intimidated on day 1. It seemed a little bit much to take in at one time. I was being instructed on what to do while hands on a sheep and shears. We learned the New Zealand sheep shearing method with a goal to shear in 48 to 50 blows per sheep. We also learned about shearing equipment set up, shearing moccasins, as well as throwing, skirting and rolling a fleece. The first day I sheared three sheep and I was proud."

"School was great. I really loved meeting all the great people I did. The school made me want to get into the sheep industry a lot more now."

"Wonderful, wonderful staff. Dedicated, gentle, and experienced. Superb."

"Thanks for all your hard work and patience. I learned a lot from working with so many assistants."

## PARTNERS

- Columbia Basin Sheep Producers Association
- Washington State Sheep Producers Association
- Washington Wool Growers Auxiliary
- American Sheep Industry

In addition, many sheep producers do not have sheep consultants, but they will consult with a sheep shearer at least once a year. Knowledgeable shearers provide a service and information at the grassroots level, helping improve wool and lamb quality and farm profitability. WSSS has implemented a mentoring process to encourage beginning shearers to partner with past Washington State Shearing School graduates to gain confidence, "on-the-road skills," and professional contacts.

## IMPACTS

- WSSS students learn proper shearing techniques, equipment care and handling, wool production and marketing, animal handling, sheep husbandry, and quality assurance issues. In addition to the students, more than 40 producers and industry stakeholders participate in the educational demonstrations concerning wool quality and sheep handling issues.
- A completion evaluation is conducted to determine students' skill and knowledge gain and to enhance the educational process of future schools. More than 95% of students arrived at the school unable to shear a sheep properly. At the completion of the school, all students demonstrated the ability to correctly handle animals, use equipment, and shear sheep. More than 50% of the students were able to successfully shear more than 5 sheep per hour at the completion of WSSS.
- Reports from eastern Washington wool pools and wool buyers are used to evaluate the quality of the wool clip marketed. Over the past three years, less than 5% of the wool marketed has been discounted. No discounts were received as a result of excessive second cuts or wool contaminates. Discounts were a result of mixed wool grades and storage damage. These results suggest shearers are assisting in the marketing of a quality wool clip, however, producers need to implement management strategies to promote wool grade sorting and to prevent storage damage of wool.
- Each year 16 beginning students and approximately 5 to 10 advanced students complete WSSS. More than 225 students from across the U.S. and Canada have attended the school since 2000 and 531 have participated since WSSS began in 1977. The WSSS has had full enrollment since 2007, with many students waiting a year to get into the school. With the increased demand for shearers, WSU Extension will be partnering with Oregon State University to offer the WSSS in the Willamette Valley in the fall of 2015.