

2008 NA Bluefaced Leicester Breeder's Survey Results

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Introduction:

The 2008 North American Bluefaced Leicester Breeder's Survey was the result of a discussion on the BFLFriends email chat list in the spring of 2008. The members thought it would be interesting for everyone to chime in with their lambing numbers. From there it was suggested to set up a poll of breeders on the site. And when the poll format was found to be too constrictive, a short survey was developed for all the users and members of the only Bluefaced Leicester Registry in North America -- the BLU Registry. The goal was to determine the actual number of Bluefaced Leicesters in the NA flocks and the number of purebred BFL lambs born in those flocks.

Method:

The intent was to determine lambing percentage rates in the NA BFL flocks. We have access to literature from the UK touting a 225% lambing rate for BFLs. The result of that discussion was a small group of breeders developing a short 10 question survey to be distributed to members of the Bluefaced Leicester Registry, BLU, along with their 2007 flock book.

The 2008 BFL Breeders survey was mailed out to 61 BFL breeders' farms along with the BLU Flock Book.

The breeders had used the registry to register lambs or were members of the Bluefaced Leicester Union.

The survey was also advertised on various email lists in an effort to reach as many breeders of purebred Bluefaced Leicesters as possible. The survey could be filled out and mailed via the USPS or emailed in. Responding households gave their farm information so there were no double entries.

The survey was to be completed and returned by July 1, 2008. The survey form was also available online to members of various Bluefaced Leicester chat list groups.

Results:

Twenty seven households responded to the survey. There were no responses from BFL breeders who did not receive the printed form with the flock book. So no responses came solely from the Internet chat lists.

100% of respondents had been mailed the flock book, although they used different means of responding. This represents a 44% response rate to the mailed out surveys.

It is hoped that in the future a higher response rate could be achieved by perhaps doing a double blind response system so that no one would have access to which numbers went with which response. It was noted that several of the most vocal, presumably largest NA BFL breeders neglected to contribute their lambing data. However, 44% is quite good for our initial attempt.

The questionnaire was designed to determine the lambing percentage in purebred Bluefaced Leicester sheep in North American flocks.

The size of the flocks varied from 1 sheep to 104 sheep. The average flock size of the respondents was 37 head. And the average number of adult BFLs in these flocks was 11 head (anywhere from 1 to 37 head).

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Only five (5.4%) of the 27 responding households had more than 20 head of BFLs, however 68% (18 farms) had more than 20 head of sheep in their flock. This suggests the BFL breed is still fairly new to many North American farm.

Of the 178 purebred BFL ewes exposed to rams in fall of 2007, 160 of the exposed ewes lambed in spring 2008 for an 89% conception rate. The total number of lambs born to those 160 ewes was 284 for a 178% lambing rate with 259 live lambs surviving to 7 days old (162% live lambs \geq 7 days).

AI lambing rates were not statistically significant due the low number of farms utilizing AI in their BFL stock . Only three farms reported using AI in the fall of 2007 (9%). They had a lambing percentage of 84% (16 lambs born to 19 AI'd ewes) and 84% live lambs \geq 7 days old (16 live lambs).

Of the seven farms reporting the use of ewe lambs in breeding, the lambing percentage was moderately reduced to 169% lambs born with 157% live lambs 7 days.

27 farms responded to the flock book survey.

All respondents were listed on the mailing of the BLU registry, none from the web at large.

So we have a 44% response rate to the mailed surveys (**61** farms listed there).

Average Total flock size is **38** head (highest was 104 and lowest was 1) (1029 sheep on 27 farms)

Average # BFLs/flock is **11** (highest was 41 and lowest was 1) (289 BFLs on 27 farms)

Total purebred BFL ewes exposed to rams or AI in fall 2007-2008: **179**

Total purebred BFL ewes who lambed prior to July 1, 2008: **160** (89% conception rate)

Total lambs born to BFL ewes: **284** (178% lambing rate of bred ewes) (159% of all exposed ewes)

Total live lambs \geq 7 days old: **259** (162% live lamb rate for bred ewes) (145% of all exposed ewes)

Only **3** farms (11%) reported using AI, and **8** farms (30%) had bred ewe lambs. One of the reporting farms had done both.

AI'd BFL ewes had a lambing rate of 84% and a live lamb rate of 84%. (19 ewes AI'd, 16 AI lambs, 16 live AI lambs) Didn't collect enough data to determine conception rate.

The overall conception rate on farms using ewe lambs was 86% with lambing rate of 169% (146% of all exposed ewes) a live lamb rate of 151% from the bred ewes (131% of exposed ewes). (Didn't collect enough data to determine conception rate on ewe lambs.)

The responses of 17 farms that did not breed any ewe lambs and did not do AI yielded the following results:

97% conception and live pregnancy rate for exposed ewes (74 of 76 exposed ewes lambed)

187% lambing rate of all exposed ewes (142 lambs born to 76 exposed ewes)

192% lambing rate of bred ewes who lived (142 lambs born to 74 bred ewes)

171% Live lamb rate of all exposed ewes (130 lambs > 7 days old born to 76 exposed ewes)

176% live lamb rate of all bred ewes who lived (130 lambs > 7 days born to 74 bred ewes)

19 non-ewe lamb breeder farms responded (two AI farms included here)

89% conception and live pregnancy rate for exposed ewes (110 of 123 exposed ewes lambed)

163% lambing rate of all exposed ewes (201 lambs born to 123 exposed ewes)

183% lambing rate of bred ewes who lived (201 lambs born to 110 live bred ewes)

150% Live lamb rate of all exposed ewes (185 lambs > 7 days old born to 123 exposed ewes)

168% live lamb rate of bred ewes who lived (185 lambs > 7 days born to 110 live bred ewes)

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Conclusion:

Clearly the results of this initial survey fall well short of the 225% rates touted in the literature for UK BFL stock. However it must be noted that many longtime well-known breeders declined to take part in the survey.

In order to get a more accurate picture of NA lambing percentages, it is hoped the BFL Breeder's survey can be repeated over the course of several years and hopefully more breeders will submit their data in the future.

The data results give us an insight to the BFL's status in NA. While the size of the overall sheep flock is higher, most breeders keep only a small number of purebred BFLs. This could be due to the relative newness of the BFL in NA or it could be due to management needs of the BFL.

Next year we may be able to tease out more information by asking more questions on the survey and leaving more comment options.

Some of the comments offered by respondents:

“Perhaps number of purebred BFL ram (adults; yearlings)? ??? For next time. Thanks!”

“We purchased on ram and six ewes in 2007. Bred the six ewes to the one ram. Result is 10 lambs (5 ram lambs & 5 ewe lambs).”

“With such a small number...I feel a bit silly participating.”

“Over the past three years in breeding and raising BFL, I find that the vigor and growth of the BFL lamb is lacking. The Wensleydale and Jacobs that I raise are stronger lambs with more vigor, respond to grass, creep feed and mother's milk resulting in a growthier lamb. BFL lamb are not making it.”

“Next year ask how many lambs born to adult ewes vs. ewe lambs to get a better idea of lambing percentages of adult BFLs.”

“Are lamb sexes important? I also crossed this BFL natural colored ram onto four crossbred Cheviot X LLW (Leicester Longwool X Black Welsh Mountain). All four of his ewes threw twins. Three fourths of the had mostly dropped singles in years past. (6 Ram lambs, two ewe lambs)”

“The lamb breeding was accidental, I do not like to breed lambs. All 3 of my purebred lambs were ram lambs, all singles, 2 white, one natural colored to a natural colored ewe. Thanks for collecting this information for BLU!”

“What is the advantage of breeding BFL ewe lambs?”

“Great start. I hope this will be an annual survey, so we can build the data we need to effectively market the BFLs and move forward with our various breeding plans.”