South African sheep breeds: Namaqua Afrikaner

SCOPE: This Info-pack provides a brief description of the Namaqua Afrikaner sheep breed.
KEY WORDS: Type, Origin, Description, Production, Products, Distribution, Numbers.


Type
Indigenous fat-tailed meat breed.

Origin of the breed
The Namaqua Afrikaner is one of the oldest sheep breeds in South Africa. The original Afrikaner sheep migrated south with the Khoikhoi people and entered South Africa between 200 and 400 AD. The Nama people kept the original Namaqua Afrikaner in the harsh dry areas of the north-west Cape and southern Namibia.

Description
The Namaqua is a lanky, high-standing sheep with a relatively narrow body, long, lean legs and a fat-tail (which stores up to 38% of its body fat). Its long legs enable it to walk vast distances in search of food and water.

They are either black or red-headed with dark hooves and horns and a white body. The tail is long and thick, sometimes reaching the heels and has a distinctive twist at the end. Their hairy coat is smooth and shiny and sheep moult each spring.

Production norms
Namaqua ewes can be mated throughout the year and are ideally suited for accelerated lambing systems.

Age at first breeding: 9.5 months
Lambing percentage (lambs born per ewe mated): 140%
Weaning percentage (lambs weaned per ewe mated): 125%

Namaqua ewes, by mobilising their fat reserves, are able to wean heavy lambs under severe drought conditions. Ewes have excellent mothering instincts and will fiercely protect their lambs against intruders.

Average growth traits of Namaqua rams and ewes at the Carnarvon Experimental station

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Rams</th>
<th>Ewes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth weight (kg)</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaning weight (kg)</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>24.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>8–month weight (kg)</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-month weight (kg)</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>44.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>18-month weight (kg)</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature ewe weight (kg)</td>
<td></td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Products**

- **Meat** - The carcass is regarded as a fat-tailed type and cannot compete for the highest grades. Compared to other breeds, the Namaqua produces a longer, narrower carcass with more fat at the posterior parts and less fat at the anterior parts.

- **Fat tail** - The fat tail can weigh as much as 8 to 12 kg. During the winter months the fat tail is quite in demand to be used with beef. The cubes of fat are firm and used for sausage making.

- **Skins** – Tanned skins are of superior quality. Namaqua Afrikaner skins are classified as glover skins. These skins are suitable for manufacturing top class leather articles such as lightweight jackets and gloves. The clothing leathers produced from these skins have a fine suede and a very pleasant handle.

**Normal production environment**

- Arid to semi-arid desert
- Most of the Namaqua Afrikaner sheep left in South Africa could be found in the Northern Cape Province.

**Breed numbers**

The Namaqua Afrikaner is an endangered breed. Cross breeding for a more market-acceptable carcass has almost led to the extinction of this breed. To prevent extinction the Department of Agriculture stepped in and bought the last purebred flock from P.J. Maas from Namies, Springbok in 1966. There are currently 2 flocks of 100 ewes each being maintained by the Northern Cape Department of Agriculture. One flock can be found at the Carnarvon Experimental Station in the North-Western Karoo and the other at the Karakul Experimental Station near Upington. In 1995, Campbell estimated that only 2000 Namaqua Afrikaner sheep are left in the country. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, through Grootfontein, is busy with a conservation project for this breed, which includes maintaining live herds, a cryopreservation bank for embryos and semen, and a blood and DNA bank.

**References**

This info-pack was compiled from various sources of information. The text may contain extracts from the following: