

# One Farmer's View of the Importance of OPP

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I am a commercial Rambouillet sheep producer in western South Dakota. I am writing to recount my experience with Ovine Progressive Pneumonia. I grew up on this sheep farm on the Belle Fourche irrigation project. Sheep have been a part of this diversified operation since 1954, with an average herd of about 600 ewes. We usually bred the flock for an early December due date. The heaviest drop always occurred right around Christmas and would last for several days before you were "over the hump." During this same period you could usually expect to experience some of the coldest weather of the year. The combination of heavy lambing and frequent sub-zero cold made lambing in sheds mandatory.

I became involved full-time in the farm in 1976. At this point it was very common for my mother to spend from eight to twelve hours a day in the sheds with around five gallons of milk replacer in insulated gallon thermos jugs. She was "poking" milk into lambs whose mothers were not providing enough to keep the hump out of the little one's back. This was literally a full-time job for her and an additional 3 to 6 hours a day for me to assist her, depending on how many twins we had. We "helped" these lambs on their mothers for four to five weeks until they began to eat corn and alfalfa hay in sufficient quantities to go it alone. It wasn't that we were trying to leave triplets on. We hardly ever had a set of triplets in January. It was cold though, so we just said the "sheep can't milk in the winter because of the cold weather and the unseasonal birthing time that we are forcing on them." We also bummed any lamb that couldn't get by on one or two sixteen ounce bottles of milk replacer a day. This resulted in from fifty to 100 "bums" every year.

The result was that we would usually sell about 110% to 120% lamb crop in May and June at weights from 115 to 125 pounds. It was a massive amount of work, usually requiring 50 man-hours/week per 100 ewes for the two months that involved the actual lambing and getting the lambs started on creep feed. We were usually rewarded with the highest fat lamb prices of the year.

We were also having to seek annual replacements in large quantities due to the nearly 20% attrition in our herd every year from what we called the "lung disease." These sheep didn't all die, although a lot of them did. Most of them were hauled to the sale as killers before they wasted away completely. We developed a technique to detect the "lungers." Periodically we would go to the pasture with the motorcycle and the horse trailer. We would chase the sheep from one end of the pasture to the other and pick up all the stragglers that we could catch and haul them to the sale.

We always used white-faced ewes that dad bought as yearlings in Montana or Wyoming and bred them to Suffolk rams that we leased from ranchers who did not need them during the season we wanted to breed in. The main criteria for selecting replacements were physical maturity and price. Wool quality was not a major consideration. It was pounds of lamb across the scale that we sought.

During lambing we were constantly battling "hard bags" and "shelly" ewes that couldn't raise one lamb without assistance. We consulted veterinarians from time to time and were told that the hard bags were probably a result of a nongangrenous mastitis the previous season. Ovine progressive pneumonia was usually blamed for the wasting away of so many ewes, but we never made the connection with the hard bags and no milk.

In 1988, I learned from a new vet in our area that there was a blood test that could determine if a sheep had antibod-

ies to the OPP virus. He also said that some of the limited research that had been done on the disease indicated that my hard bag problem might be caused by the OPP virus also. I was intrigued, but put off by the seemingly awesome task of drawing blood from 600 ewes and the expense of having it analyzed. However, my father was interested in liquidating his 80% interest in the herd so that he could retire. I decided to test my 120 ewes just to see if we really had OPP and to what extent it was present. The process was not as bad as I had anticipated. The outcome was 106 positives out of 120 submissions. That was 89%!

It was clear to me that I did not want to buy his share of the sheep, and, in fact, I didn't even want to keep the sheep I already owned. We made a decision to liquidate the entire herd.

We had 300 yearlings on feed for replacements that had never been run with the established herd. I decided to test a randomly sampled 10% of that group to see how much OPP was in them. We turned up 3 positives out of 30 submissions. I decided to buy dad's share of those 300 yearlings and test them all (including retesting of the 30, just to check the lab). This was done; the lab was consistent on the retested ewes and we turned up a total of 27 positives.

I lambed the negatives in December, '88/January, '89. I found one hard bag in that group. Hard bags were not usually a feature of yearlings even in the old herd, however. Basically, they were a good bunch of sheep with fewer problems than I was used to. I began a program of tattooing each ewe in the ear as she lambed so that I could maintain some reliable written records from year to year. Even with the added chores of tattooing and writing down notes on each sheep, I was able to lamb the 275 yearlings with no outside help.

Blood testing the next summer turned up 20% positives for OPP. This was very discouraging, but the relatively easy lambing season made me determined to stay with the program for another year. I culled the positives from that group and from my purchased replacement group.

The lamb market was starting to slide at this point just as I was needing even more return to cover the \$3 cost of testing and to purchase additional ewe lambs to expand the herd. The lambing season of '90-91 convinced me to stay the course. I had no hard bags that sea-

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