

SHACKLED BY A HEAVY BURDEN: OPP

Long-time readers of *The Shepherd* magazine know that ovine progressive pneumonia is a recurring topic of mine in this column. If some of you get tired of hearing about it, I apologize. But most of us tend to become passionate about things that have affected us personally or had a major impact on our lives.

I can think of no other topic that has had a bigger impact on us in the sheep business than OPP. Had we not eradicated it from our flock 21 years ago, I am certain we would not be in the business today.

The story on a new strategy for eradicating OPP found on page 18 of last month's *Shepherd* should be required reading for anyone in the U.S. who raises sheep to make a profit. The mainstream

sheep industry has been very slow to recognize the disease, let alone acknowledge the economic damage it has inflicted. I am convinced that is because most producers mistakenly believe those damages are just a normal part of raising sheep.

As we struggle mightily to resuscitate our industry through the Let's Grow program, we simply can't ignore the ways that ovine progressive pneumonia has thwarted those recovery efforts. So let's look at just a few of the biggies.

The whole bottom line of Let's Grow is to boost lamb production in the U.S. There are three primary ways to do that:

1) we can change the size of the animal (a process that almost always changes costs in a linear fashion);

2) we can change the number of ewes, and/or;

3) we can change the reproductive rate of the animal.

U.S. producers have had the genetic tools to dramatically change the reproductive rate for over 50 years. It hasn't happened and I believe one of the main reasons is ovine progressive pneumonia. Many commercial producers, at least in farm-flock country, are still afraid of ewes giving birth to too many

lambs. Most, at some point, have experienced problems with ewes not being able to raise two lambs, let alone three (or more). Occasionally mastitis, poor nutrition or lack of natural milking ability are to blame – but often it is OPP that is the culprit.

During our OPP years, we (mainly Lyn and our daughters) frequently raised 40-60 bottle lambs annually, a significant percentage coming from ewes rearing only one lamb. Post-OPP, nearly half the flock routinely weans three.

Researchers at US-MARC in Nebraska have demonstrated that a significant percentage of crossbred ewes can wean triplets totally unassisted off of grass – proving that two maternal feeding stations does not necessarily

need to be a limiting factor. Yet, we persist in fearing “too many” lambs.

Raising orphans is definitely easier now than it was 40 years ago. But even with great milk replacers and amazing automated feeding equipment, orphan lambs are still a lot of work – and a fairly high risk venture. They are never a profit center until the overwhelming majority of ewes in a flock are weaning at least two lambs on their own.

So how big an impact can OPP eradication have on U.S. lamb production? In farm flock country, it can double the lamb crop weaned! I know this to be a fact because it happened for us. And in the process, we have decreased our labor requirements by reducing the time wasted on “special needs” animals – both ewes and lambs.

But OPP isn't killing us just through decreased milk production and fewer, more expensive lambs weaned. Perhaps equally important is the loss of productive lifespan in our ewes.

When I started raising sheep in 4-H 60

years ago (nope, not kidding), the rule of thumb was that ewes lasted four or five years, six years max. We used to routinely bring in “solid mouth” Rambouillet-type ewes from out West, and though it was often a little hard to mouth those sheep accurately because their teeth were very short, there were relatively few broken mouths among them. Based upon their teeth, those ewes should have been able to remain in the flock two-three years on soft Midwest grass – but they rarely did due to udder problems or a debilitating lack of body condition. Though I didn't realize it at the time, looking back I am convinced the reason was ovine progressive pneumonia.

I don't know what the average productive lifespan of a ewe might be today. My guess is it hasn't changed much over the years. I have heard a 20-percent figure bandied about as the average national ewe replacement rate. If that is true for the Jan. 1, 2018 national ewe flock of 3.01 million head and we add just one additional year to the average productive lifespan of a ewe, that alone could boost lambs available for slaughter annually by over 100,000 head. That's without adding a single ewe to the national flock or increasing weaning percentages by even a point.

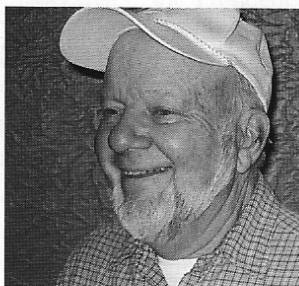
Minus OPP, it's no pipedream. The oldest ewes in our flock currently are nine years old. They will hopefully produce triplets and raise them this spring. The oldest post-OPP ewes that have raised lambs for us have been

11 years of age. They didn't have a tooth in their heads but were in thrifty condition when they finally went down the road. They were free of OPP and healthy.

During the OPP years, it was not uncommon for our lambing seasons to be strung out over several weeks, sometimes months. Even in my prime, my concentration and attention to detail always began to wane signifi-

cantly beyond about the third week of lambing. And especially if you have unhealthy ewes that aren't holding up their end of the deal, that's when lamb death loss really be-

Dispatch from Mormon Trail Farm



Clark BreDahl

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gins to mount.

Minus OPP, winter and spring lambing seasons are usually short and sweet. Ninety-plus percent of our ewes routinely lamb in a single heat cycle. There have been a couple of times when it has been a perfect 100 percent. Short, compact lambing seasons always result in more live lambs, regardless of the time of year.

Why tolerate even the possibility that OPP is holding back the production, profit and pleasure derived from a sheep operation? It used to be that eradicating the disease involved a fair amount of initial sacrifice.

We thought that obtaining OPP-free ewes meant weaning ewe lambs immediately at birth with a month to six weeks of labor intensive milk replacer feeding to follow. Then it might be necessary to journey hundreds of miles to find an OPP-free ram to put on

those young ewes. For small to medium-sized flocks, the process was a pain. For many larger operations, it literally did not seem possible.

With new research and the resulting new strategy for eradication, the old excuses for not eliminating OPP no longer apply. The bugaboos of high labor costs and testing expense have been greatly reduced, and the need to cull still productive ewes from the flock has been eliminated. Vigilance in establishing and maintaining separate test-positive and test-negative flocks remains, but those who have done so almost universally agree it has changed both the economics and the entire direction of their sheep operation.

I am reminded of lines from an old hymn that read: "shackled by a heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame." Sometimes I think that's where we are in the sheep in-

dustry –crushed before we ever think about expanding by unpleasant memories from the past and an attitude that it can never be any different or better.

Go back and read or re-read the article appearing on pages 18-21 of last month's *The Shepherd*. Talk with someone who has actually eliminated OPP from their flock if you need to. There is a listing of producers from all over the country who have done so on the OPP Concerned Sheep Producers website, www.oppociety.org.

Then, take the plunge. If, incredibly, you find no traces of it in your flock, you have lost nothing. You are truly blessed and can concentrate your best efforts on other management issues that may need tweaking. If OPP is present, however, research indicates it is almost certainly costing you money – whether you realize it or not.

It CAN be fixed and it may change your entire outlook towards the sheep business. Best case scenario, you may even end up saying, "By golly, Let's Grow!" Let's get this done.

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