

# A Sheep Health Certification Program: An "Impossible Dream"?

By Jean T. Walsh in collaboration with Judy Lewman

While admiring sheep in a breed display at a sheep and wool festival recently, I noted that individual flocks were separated with solid barriers which did not allow interaction between groups. The animals were excellent examples of several different types of sheep, and included both wool and meat breeds. When I complimented the person in charge of the display on both the quality of the animals and the pen set up, I was stunned to be told that the flocks were segregated because they had been "certified" OPP (Ovine Progressive Pneumonia), free. I asked the person who volunteered this information who had certified the flocks free of OPP. She thought a minute, then said that their vets had. I didn't pursue the conversation any further; it was obvious that this person was disseminating false information but would probably defend her stance. However, I began to think about the difficulties of a group or organization certifying that livestock is free of any communicable disease or disorder.

The only certification program that I know about is the Scrapie Flock Certification Program (SFCP), which was conceived by, and is monitored closely by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), through Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). While there are varied opinions about the effectiveness of the Scrapie Flock Certification Program, it is an attempt at identifying flocks/herds believed to be free of the disease. Millions of dollars have been spent on the scrapie program, and it is still being refined. The immensity of the task of monitoring the program and all flocks which are participating, including being able to trace each animal back to its flock of origin, can hardly be overstated.

It has been suggested by some industry leaders that efforts to identify and eradicate OPP, as well as other diseases and disorders, can form independent "modules" which could be piggybacked onto an existing health or production program. The Scrapie Flock Certification Program is usually mentioned as a possible base upon which various health modules can be added. However, to date, most of these suggestions have not been followed for a variety of reasons, including a shortage of accredited testing facilities. New Jersey has allowed the veterinarians who come to the farms to

monitor sheep and goats for the Scrapie Flock Certification Program to draw blood for OPP testing. However, despite several attempts at an organized, industry wide "Certification" program for OPP and other sheep and goat diseases, nothing has come to fruition.

In 1993, as chair of American Sheep Industry's (ASI's) Health Committee, Dr. Cleon Kimberling, of Colorado State University, introduced a proposal for a national flock health certification program. His plan was built around the newly organized Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (VSFCP) and was intended to "piggyback" or "add-on" to the scrapie program.

Dr. Kimberling's proposal received considerable publicity. Despite much producer enthusiasm, the program was never implemented.

In the summer of 1996, Dr. Kimberling presented a proposal to the American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners (AASRP) for the development of a "Sheep-Specific Pathogen-Free Program" ("Flock Health Certification Program"). The goals of the proposed program were as follows:

1) To help identify and prioritize target pathogens, develop a questionnaire to be circulated to all AASRP members having them list the top five or six most important disease entities which have a major economic impact on production and/or utilize the results of the 1996 Sheep Health & Productivity Needs Assessment Producer Survey conducted by the USDA/APHIS Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health and ASI/PERC.

2) Develop phases to the program so that the producer can start and advance to the next stage as rapidly as testing and qualifications can be met. For example, these phases might include:

3) PHASE 1:

- Establish a valid veterinary/client/patient relationship.
- Establish an immunization program specific for the flock.
- Establish a total parasite control program including monitoring.
- Establish a health and production record system.
- Establish a biosecurity program relative to introduction of new sheep onto the premises.

PHASE 2:

- Fulfill the requirements of PHASE 1.

- Brucella ovis-free. (Two negative tests 45-60 days apart on all rams 12 months or older. Annual retest for recertification.)

- Foot rot-free. (No clinical cases for the past 12 months plus a quarantine and treatment program for all new introductions.)

- Caseous Lymphadenitis immunization program. (Vaccinate all replacement ewe lambs and ram lambs retained for breeding purposes.)

- Sheep Ked and Scabies-Free for the past 12 months.

- Scrapie (Enrollment in the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program/VSFCP.)

- Abortion Diseases (Develop a strategic health and management scheme.)

PHASE 3:

- Fulfill the requirements of PHASES 1 & 2.

- Scrapie (Continuation of the steps in the VSFCP.)

- Ovine Progressive Pneumonia/OPP-Free (An annual negative test on all animals 12 months or older).

PHASE 4:

- Fulfillment of the requirements of PHASES 1, 2 & 3.

- FREE of
  - SHEEP KEDS
  - SCABIES
  - BRUCELLA OVIS
  - FOOT ROT
  - OPP
  - SCRAPIE

- IMMUNIZATIONS FOR: Caseous Lymphadenitis and other applicable diseases endemic to the area or region.

Dr. Kimberling's plan was favorably received by the AASRP, but no further action to implement it was taken.

However, in 1998, as a result of a grassroots attempt to revive the program after AASRP did not act upon it, producers petitioned the Sheep and Goat Committee of the United States Animal Health Association (USAHA) for action. This resulted in the USAHA Sheep and Goat Committee passing Resolution No. 13, which states:

"RESOLUTION: USAHA urges United States Department of Agriculture-Animal Plant Health Inspection Service-Veterinary Service (USDA-APHIS-VS) to mandate that National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) approve laboratories for the performance of serological tests for the diagnosis of Brucella ovis, caseous lymphadenitis, (Corynebacteria pseudotuberculosis), Johne's disease (Mycobacteria paratuberculosis), and ovine progressive pneumonia (OPP)."

"RESPONSE: Due to limited resources and an increase in the requests for test standardization, the NVSL is developing a 5-year plan to address the standardization of serological tests beyond those that are now in place to support VS programs. A definitive date has not been established for completing this plan, but the Laboratory's intent is to do so as early as possible. The tests specified in the resolution will be considered when the 5-year plan is developed."

While there is no guarantee that a Certification Program will be developed, this resolution is a necessary first step.

Although Ontario and the United Kingdom both have comprehensive, very broad based sheep health programs in place, the lack of any such program in this country has caused concerns for many producers and others engaged in small ruminant health activities. Various groups have attempted to implement a health program. The Ohio Department of Agriculture recommended the formation of a committee of producers, veterinarians and others with interests in small ruminant health to propose a program addressing this situation. Although a committee was appointed and convened, to date, the Ohio program has not progressed. Dr. Paul Hunter, an Ohio veterinarian, has suggested a health plan for the Finnsheep breeders, but that plan has not been realized either.

When health problems are considered, OPP is usually one of the first Sheep diseases that is mentioned as a problem and a potential module to the Scrapie Flock Certification Program. OPP can silently cause economic harm to flocks which harbor the virus. Although OPP is spread from ewes to their lambs via colostrum and milk, the virus can also be transmitted between adult animals. Thus, it is possible for flocks that don't have OPP to contract the virus from infected animals. Once a sheep is infected with the virus, it remains infected for life and will be a source of contamination for other sheep. Although not every OPP infected animal exhibits symptoms of the disease, those that do manifest clinical symptoms cannot be cured.

Because it is possible to control and/or eradicate OPP, a producer and veterinary practitioner group was formed called the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society (OPPCBS). There have been suggestions about having the OPP Society "Certify" that certain flocks are clean of the disease. However, for a tiny volunteer group with limited funds to

attempt to "Certify" that flocks are free of OPP would be functionally very difficult, if not impossible. Also, it was never the intention of the founders and members of the OPP Society to certify flock status about OPP or anything else. The organization's bylaws clearly state that one of the goals of the group is to "assist in the development of guidelines for certifying and maintaining OPP test negative flocks by appropriate government agencies." The OPP Society has published its own voluntary guidelines for serological testing, and many members support the concept of an OPP add-on module for the Scrapie Program.

The OPP Society is an active, dynamic group which helps to make producers aware of Ovine Progressive Pneumonia and serves as a reservoir of information about the disease. Although the group acknowledges that (Caprine arthritis-encephalitis), CAE, in goats is similar and related to OPP in sheep, it does not attempt to address CAE. A directory is published listing the names, addresses, breeds and other applicable information about producers who are members of the group, and thus aware of OPP and its affect on flocks. It is not mandatory that member breeders have tested their flocks, or that they are clean of the disease, it is only necessary that they are cognizant of the virus and are addressing it in whatever way they deem to be appropriate in their individual situations. The OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society membership includes farms from 35 states and two Canadian provinces as well as 40 breeds of sheep and numerous cross-breeds.

In an industry where obtaining accurate health information can be difficult, the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society is filling a unique role by disseminating scientifically correct information about OPP and encouraging awareness of the virus and how it can affect flocks. Also, the group acts as a clearing house for information on other health issues. Literature and information about OPP and other sheep related problems (including CAE in goats), is available from the OPP Society and, for a small fee, a video demonstrating the proper technique for drawing blood for OPP testing can be purchased.

While it is not feasible or possible for the OPP Concerned Breeders Society to "certify" to the status of flocks that are part of it, a membership, it remains the only non government group that is attempting to identify and eradicate a sheep health problem by making information available to producers.