Challenges for the Sheep Industry

Holly Neaton, DVM March 30, 2016

Productivity improvement and industry collaboration. These are 2 out of 4 goals of the ASI's Lamb Industry Roadmap. In the winter Polypay newsletter Brett Pharo asked us what we, as an organization do to move the implementation of the Roadmap forward and help the American sheep industry make rapid productivity improvements.

One of the surest and most progressive ways would be to improve the health of the flocks. We spend time and money attempting to manipulate genetics and fail to realize that diseases hold our animals back from expressing the genetic traits we try so hard to improve.

I hear testimonies and horror stories from flock owners of all breeds who live all over the country. They call as they have seen the little OPP Concerned Sheep Breeder's Society ad in The Shepherd or Sheep Industry News with my phone number in it describing a clinically Ovine Progressive Pneumonia virus infected sheep. I simply listen and give them some advice on diagnosing and control of the virus.

USDA reports that close to 30% of the sheep in the USA are infected with the OPP virus. A friend of mine who is very involved in the swine industry can't believe the sheep industry doesn't care about a disease that is so prevalent.

The OPP virus only lives in the cells of sheep. It doesn't hang around in the environment like other nasty diseases that we could talk about another time that need to be gone also (Johnes, Caseous Lymphadenitis, Scrapie). You buy the OPP virus when you buy the sheep.

The clinically wasting sheep or hardbag ewe is only the tip of the iceberg. Production is affected a long time before clinical signs become evident – poorer milk production, reproduction efficiency, lameness, colostrum quality. The virus sneaks in to slowly invade and affect productivity. You just buy more and more milk replacer and cull younger and younger ewes.

The USDA MARC in Clay Center Nebraska has been researching this virus over the last few decades. This has revealed some wonderful news regarding how the virus is transmitted. We have used this research to run an Eradication Trial in Minnesota with the help of the USDA, Board of Animal Health, MN Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, Minnesota Lamb and Wool Producers and the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society.

We are in our 3rd year of the trial and have found that if the protocols for avoiding transmission and testing are followed, the virus can be controlled without orphaning lambs or shipping all your adult ewes. All management and testing is aimed at the replacement ewe lambs, keeping them free from the virus by avoiding contact with the adult flock after weaning.

We unfortunately have also found that using genetics to breed your way out of OPPV infection does not work. We have suspicions that certain genotypes affect how the virus is recognized or controlled in the animal but obviously much more research is needed. We sincerely hope the USDA continues to fund and encourage this research.

The Eradication Trial information can be found at:

www.bah.state.mn.us/sheep-goats;
www.oppsociety.org (look in the Library)

The USDA is responsive to industry needs. They approached the OPP Society several years ago to ask if they could be of any help when they found their presence was no longer needed for Scrapie eradication but they still desired to keep involved with the sheep industry. They may not have money to directly spend but their field staff are out there and want to be involved with producers.

Hence the MN Eradication Trial. The USDA and MN BAH DVMs and technicians collect all the samples and confirm inventories. The MN VDL gives a discount on the ELITEST (an elisa test used in other countries found to be much more accurate for small ruminant lentivirus detection) and the MLWP donate for each animal tested also. This brings the cost down to $2 per head plus materials.

Wouldn't it be great if this could be a nationwide program supported by the USDA? We asked a few representatives to suggest this to the ASI Health Committee and state representative committees at the meeting in Scottsdale and found no response or interest.

On a personal note, I work with medical device companies who use sheep for many of their research projects. I am constantly searching for healthy sheep to fill their project orders but they are getting harder to find. They need to be negative for OPP and free from CL. Both have invaded so many of our flocks. I am also scared to death of purchasing rams from a sale or any flock that has not tested though I am in need of new genetics.

I have had Polypays for 30 years, purchasing my first ram via air freight from Crumpled Horn Ranch in Montana. They told me at that time they were OPP free and to watch out for the virus.

So what am I suggesting? Maybe a discussion on how the Polypay breed – one of the most productive and seemingly progressive using NSIP information– could lead the way by using improvement of animal health as a key to reach both of half of the goals of the Roadmap: increasing productivity and industry collaboration.

Anyone want to talk about it?

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