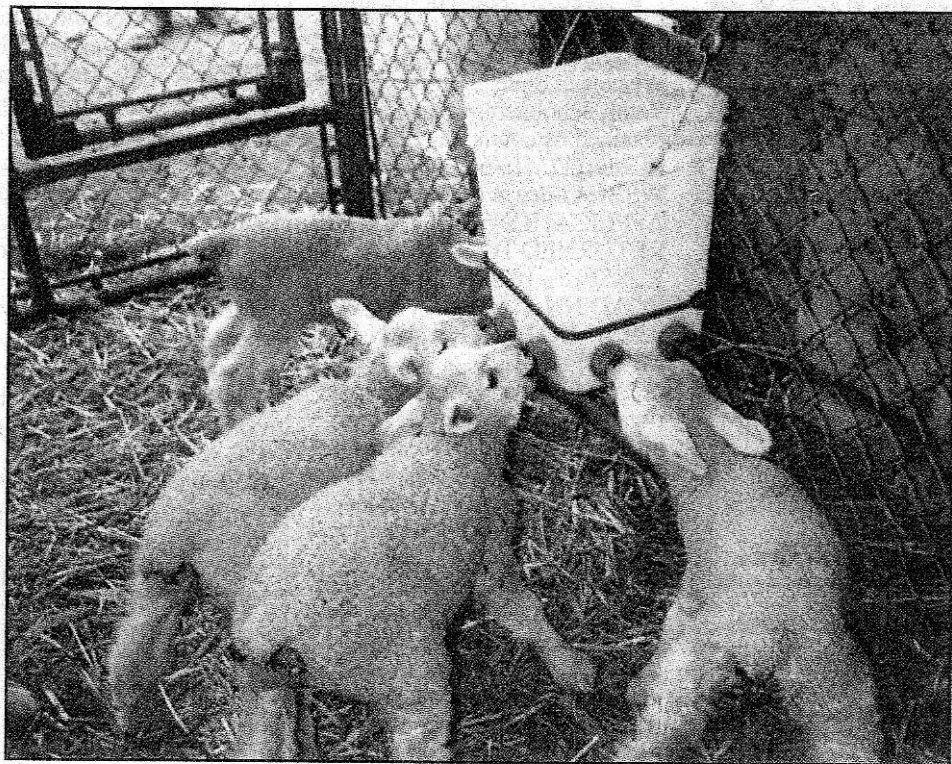


# OPP Society Has Role In Industry Conference

University of Idaho veterinarian and researcher, Dr. Marie Bulgin, comes to this year's Wisconsin Sheep Industry Conference in part courtesy of the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeder's Society. And Bill Duffield, conference presenter from Ontario, is a long time member. Many producers have heard of this group and have probably wondered what kind of people would actually join that kind of club. It's a "unique bunch", more than 100 producers, vets and researchers - from 32 states and provinces - representing 38 breeds and numerous commercial crosses - with flocks ranging from just a handful of ewes to more than 1,000 (average 75+). And each one elected to throw \$10 into the kitty every year in order to educate the industry about the effects of ovine progressive pneumonia (OPP) and the benefits of its eradication.

"The only similar organization in animal agriculture that I know of is the National Mastitis Council serving the dairy industry, definitely more grand in scale than the OPP Society." Says Bear Creek, WI veterinarian and Society co-founder, Dr. Bob Leder. A client of Leder's, Jim Schultz of Clintonville, WI first learned of OPP in his commercial flock in 1988. "Jim had a high infection rate and was losing ewes as 3-5 year olds," says Leder. "He culled extensively (convenient due to a drought) and was having trouble finding replacements. An organization to educate and help producers locate uninfected breeding stock seemed like a good idea. Jim and I held our first meeting at the Wisconsin Conference in 1990 and by that fall we had 30 members!" Others who were instrumental in getting the OPP group up and running include USDA research veterinarian, Dr. Randall Cutlip; Cornell University animal scientist, Brian Magee; and University of Minnesota small ruminant veterinary specialist, Dr. Cindy Wolf.

The insidious nature of OPP, and resulting controversy surrounding its importance, leaves "experts" divided into



**Above:** A major step in cleaning up a flock from OPP can be isolating newborn lambs and rearing them away from their dams. Producers using this practice acknowledge its difficulties but say it's the way to go to assure a health status in their flock.



**Left:** Dr. Holly Neaton, Minnesota veterinarian and Director of the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders, demonstrates blood sampling, a critical part of testing sheep for Ovine Progressive Pneumonia.

# OPP

from page 1

opposite camps and producers caught in the middle. Early on the Society decided to steer clear of this debate, conserving their energy and limited funds for educational purposes. Projects to date include: production of a video tape on drawing blood; development of an educational brochure; guidelines for blood testing; biosecurity tips for the showing and publishing an annual membership directory and twice-yearly newsletter. In addition, much of their information has been posted on the Internet (now temporarily located on the Groveland Farm site at <http://impossibledream.com/sheep/sheeph.html>). The Web pages have been made possible through the generosity of retiring OPP Secretary/Treasurer, Mary Jarvis and her husband Rusty.

One project awaiting funding is a compilation of articles into an OPP Management Manual, and a recent surge of interest may soon make that a reality. With their '99 membership directory, the Society posts a 50% increase in membership over the past year. This is due in part to the Internet exposure and members' participation in discussions on SHEEP-L, and reflects a growing awareness of food animal health issues throughout the industry. "Part of the OPP Society's growth spurt is undoubtedly due to simply being in the right place at the right time," says the group's current leader, Lewman. "The '96 BSE scare, the resulting multi-million dollar Oprah Winfrey litigation, and animal rights activism have all been contributing factors to mushrooming consumer food safety concerns. As more and more sheep producers enter direct marketing, either as individuals or cooperatively, these issues will begin to hit closer to home."

Food safety issues and educational benefits aside, producers also join the OPP Society to network with other like-minded shepherds. Several member flocks are already enrolled in the VSFCP (Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program) and Wisconsin Conference presenter, Bill Duffield, was one of the first to enroll in Ontario's new flock health risk assessment program. Many OPP Society members have expressed interest in Dr. Cleon Kimberling's proposal for a voluntary, non-regulatory National Health Accreditation Program in the U.S. Where that might lead is anyone's guess, but seedstock buyers, both at home and abroad, are increasingly demanding validation of health status. As one Society member states, "...when the devil skates to work' is not a satisfactory response to an export agent asking when my breed association might be able to provide 500 yearling ewes from flocks enrolled in the Scrapie program."

Entering its 10th year, the OPP Society remains low key. The office of president was eliminated last year - too stuffy - and seven directors now select their own chair. An appointed secretary fields requests for information. While the group's bylaws require that their board include at least one veterinarian, directors stress that callers are not trying to circumvent their local vet. "Many who contact us have been told - by other producers, extension agents, and even veterinarians - that OPP is nothing to worry about," says Lewman. "By the time they get to us they're often at the end of their rope, having exhausted all known local contacts." The Society, assisted by the AASRP (American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners), began

last year to build a veterinary referral list. Their goal is to eventually network with at least one vet in every state and province. Literature provided by the OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society notes: We represent many different breeds and many different situations. Some of us have, despite repeated testing, never had an animal test positive for OPP; some of us started with stock from a clean flock; some of us are in the process of eradicating the disease from our flocks. In other words, membership in the Society is not intended to indicate freedom from OPP, but rather an active concern about the effects of this disease within our own flocks and within the North American Sheep Industry as a whole.

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