

# Sheep and goat production on an upswing

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Sheep and goat numbers are on the uptick across Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma as the result of a growing interest in raising the ruminants for show, hobby and retiree purposes, note Extension personnel in the three states.

“There has been a large increase in goat numbers due to an increased number being shown at livestock shows and fairs,” said Dr. Steve Hart, Extension goat specialist at Langston University in Langston, Okla. “Goats are one of the cheaper farm animals to purchase for show and require a minimum of equipment for the showing.”

Sheep and goats can also supplement income and be environmentally sustainable, said Lincoln County (Neb.) Extension Educator Randy Saner. He said that cattle, sheep and goats could complement each other when it comes to forage. Cattle eat grass while sheep consume broadleaf leaves. Goats can and do eat woody and tannin-containing plants. Undesirable weeds removed by sheep and goats means using fewer pesticides and their manure can be supplemental fertilizer.

Kansas State University saw the need to address the education needs for both students entering the sheep and goat industry and producers through Extension education and recently hired Dr. Alison Crane as KSU’s sheep and meat goat specialist.

“I have been here for almost three weeks, but I can honestly say there seems to be a large interest in the sheep and goat industries. People seem interested in diversifying their operations,” Crane said. “In the last few years, both national and Kansas sheep and goat numbers have seen small increases in population. In total sheep numbers Kansas ranks about 23rd in the United States and eighth in total goat numbers.”

Oklahoma ranks third in the nation in goats with 92,000, said Hart, while in 2016, Nebraska ranked fifth in the nation in numbers of sheep and lambs. The breakdown is 83,000 sheep and lambs in 2016, compared to 80,000 in 2015. The state had 24,000 goats in 2016, Saner said, which included 20,000 meat goats and 4,000 dairy goats, compared to 3,500 in 2015.

All three educators provide Extension training and educational materials in their respective states, respond to producer questions and, when needed, do on-farm consulting.

A specialist for 27 years, Hart notes the biggest challenge to raising sheep and goats is worms that affect the stomach and intestines. In addition, predators are a huge problem. “Coyotes have voted goat meat to be the best tasting meat without barbecue sauce,” he quipped.

“The biggest problem with worms are the dewormers that we formerly used to kill the worms no longer work because the worms have developed resistance to them from overuse and misuse, much like bacteria becoming resistant to antibiotics,” said Hart. “This means that we rely on preventing infection with worms by using such things as rotation grazing, not grazing close to the ground and culling the most susceptible animals.

“We now only treat animals that are significantly infected with what is called selective treatment. The major worm in sheep and goats is the Barberpole worm that sucks blood. When infection is bad the animals become anemic. You can identify animals that are anemic by looking at the color of the tissue inside the lower eyelid (mucous membranes). A red color is good, a pale red color is bad (anemic) and those animals should be dewormed.”

This method of identifying infected animals uses the FAMACHA (FAffa Malan CHArt) chart, said Saner. Developed in South Africa, the chart shows five high-resolution colors of eyelids. The colors correlate with the shade of red on a scale of 1 (most pale) to 5 (most red) with a level of anemia.

Comparing the animal’s lower eyelid with the FAMACHA chart shows the level of anemia in that animal. The paler the eyelid the more worms the animal is likely to have.

“Worms of lesser importance cause diarrhea and thin animals,” said Hart. “So these animals should also be dewormed. We can use combinations of dewormers successfully against resistant worms. We no longer deworm all the animals in a herd because it promotes dewormer resistance. We no longer deworm by the calendar or stage of production. We use a dewormer only when necessary.”

The next biggest challenge is predators with local dogs looking for the sport of killing sheep or goats the number one problem followed by coyotes, said Hart. “The most common method of preventing predation is with the use of guard animals such as guard dogs and to a lesser extent, donkeys. Electric fence can help as well as closing animals up in a lot with dog-proof fence overnight since most predation happens at night.”

Saner added that having more than one guard dog is desirable as a single guard dog can be distracted when a pack of predators moves in, leaving the herd vulnerable. Llamas have also been used for herd and flock protection.

Fencing sheep in is easy, but fencing goats in is more challenging since goats are very smart and mischievous. Getting out is a powerful reward. There are many ways to successfully fence goats in, but you have to be smarter than a goat.

Positives for goats and sheep-Low entry cost, few facilities required. High reproductive rate-they kid/lamb at a year of age and half have twins. They kid/lamb once a year. This means that you start with a few and in 5-7 years, you have many. Sheep and goats eat brush and weeds that cattle don't eat. They require less grain supplementation and in general are low-input animals.

Crane said another challenge with increasing herd and flock numbers may be consumption of the available lamb and goat meat. Her Oklahoma counterpart notes that shouldn't be a problem. Whether part of an ethnic or specialty diet, Hart said he expects goat meat prices range from \$2 to in excess of \$3 a pound and are expected to remain high due to a shortage of goats relative to demand for goat meat.

“Sixty percent of the goat meat consumed in the United States must be imported, predominantly from Australia. There is great potential for large commercial goat farms, using goats for controlling invasive species and cashing in on the strong goat meat market,” he said.

While Hart notes the most important thing prospective goat producers can do is to visit other goat farms to learn how they raise goats and what type of business they have - show stock, registered stock or commercial animals – he and his counterparts also are working to provide the latest information from research. “There are online courses available for goats from universities, as well as some Master Goat producer programs and meat goat boot camps. The most extensive online education program is Langston University’s Goat Education program (Google certification, Langston goat education). There are 2,943 enrolled in the program and 384 have completed it,” he said.

Nebraska Extension annually hosts a Sheep and Goat Expo, said Saner, and the Nebraska Sheep and Goat Producers Association also hosts an annual event and workshops.

Crane notes her main goal for her position is to be an advocate for the sheep and goat industries and to increase interest and understanding to facilitate growth, efficiency and profitability through research, teaching, and Extension work. “I am planning workshops targeting producers wanting to acquire sheep and/or goats and existing producers to explain costs of production and minimal inputs for success.

“I also plan to set programs on how to incorporate sheep and goats into existing cattle operations. There is a lot of potential across Kansas for different ways to join the sheep and/or goat industries. In just a few weeks I have seen many different types of operations that are successful and I believe the industries can meet the desires of any producer.

Not only will Crane work with producers in the field, she is also teaching undergraduate students and coaches KSU’s wool judging team. “Wool judging is based on industry standards. Producers of wool are paid based on clean fleece weight, with finer (based on diameter, measured in micron) wool being more desirable. Therefore, heavier, higher yielding fleeces are worth more, especially when they are a finer micron.”

Students in wool judging learn how to determine by feel the weight, yield, and micron (to an extent) of the fleece. These skills allow them to determine the most valuable fleece within breed classes and on a rail of fleeces. Other components include understanding the wool market and processing, including determining staple length and knowing limitations of current technology, as well as learning about color of the fleece, tenderness, and many other quality traits. Similar to livestock judging, reasons are taken on breed classes, therefore knowledgeable speaking to an audience is also a component.

Crane echoed her counterparts when she noted there is a huge opportunity for the sheep and goat industries in the United States. “With new marketing, changes in consumer perception and incoming producers across the country, it seems to me there is a new excitement about these industries.”

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