

Obtaining Quality Veterinary Care for the Sheep Flock

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Many producers in Indiana have access to a good veterinarian that is interested in sheep, and located within a reasonable distance. However, I all too often hear producers state that they have no access to a veterinarian that is either competent with, or interested in working with sheep. The focus of this article will be to offer some potential suggestions on how to obtain and keep quality veterinary care for the flock.

The state of Indiana is more fortunate than many, in that there are a number of very good veterinarians that enjoy working with sheep and other small ruminants. There are also a number of students at the Purdue Veterinary School that are interested in working with small ruminants. Each spring I lecture to the Veterinary students enrolled in the small ruminant and llama course. There are usually 25 students or so interested enough in sheep and goats to take this course.

So, why do some regions of the state or many individual producers have trouble obtaining satisfactory veterinary care for their flocks? The answer is simply economics.

The number of sheep in Indiana is well behind the number of hogs, horses, beef cattle, dairy cattle, and certainly, the number of dogs and cats. Also, flock sizes tend to be small (25-30 head) and somewhat scattered. Just as important, many producers tend to use veterinarians for three things; as an unpaid source of information, as a resource during emergencies (especially during lambing), and as a resource to obtain health papers. None of these three types of activities make much economic sense for a veterinarian to spend much time on.

These types of services make very little economic sense to producers either. Especially the emergency services. Often, the big emergencies are big because the situation has a bleak outlook. Some of the health emergencies we expect veterinarians to solve, or try to solve, would require them to be God-like. I do not think they offer courses on that in Vet School. When they are not solved at a high rate, we end up with a disappointed producer, a disappointed veterinarian, and a bill for services rendered (pun intended) often times exceeding the salvage value of the animal at a sale barn.

There has to be a way for the sheep industry to make better use of professional animal health services. The key is to make sheep health care more economical for both producers and veterinarians.

One method of making the situation more economical for both parties is to develop a workable plan of preventative health management with a veterinarian. This plan could contain, for example, things such as; ram breeding soundness exam, ultrasound pregnancy detection, post mortem exams, help with a parasite control program (including fecal exams), control of abortive diseases, blood drawing (for spider or scrapie genotyping), proper handling of materials for submission to labs, etc. An exact program would need to be tailored to specific farms and the type of health problems that have been historically a problem. The point being that a preventative health program for a sheep flock makes more sense for both the producer and the veterinarian from an economic and a sheep health standpoint.

If a sound preventative flock health plan can be implemented over a large number of ewes, then it becomes even more effective from an economic and animal health situation. Since there are only a relatively small number of operations in excess of 150 to 200 ewes, the most logical method of increasing ewe numbers to utilize preventative health management programs is for small to medium sized producers to work together.

Many animal health management practices cut across types of operations. Sheep people have more in common than they do different when it comes to keeping the flock healthy and productive.

For example, assume an area of the state has a number of producers with various sized flocks with differing production goals and is having trouble obtaining adequate veterinary care. If they could come together, form a group, draw up what their health needs are, how many ewes they represent, and approach a veterinary practice with a plan to develop a cooperative sheep health program for the members, they would likely receive positive attention. Perhaps an agreement could be developed that provides for some base services already mentioned such as; ram fertility check, fecal exams, etc. Also, services such as buying quantities of medication and vaccines in bulk, some individual farm visits, sponsoring educational activities, etc., could be discussed.

Combining a preventative sheep health program over a high number of ewes is potentially a win-win situation for producers and veterinarians. It could make good veterinary care available for producers, preventative care is the soundest form of health management for producers, and it potentially could make sheep a more profitable and satisfying part of a veterinarian's practice. Also, it could bring producers together through common needs, which is always a positive for the industry.