

EweGROW

Developing a road map to increase the competitiveness of the Ontario sheep industry

Over the past year, Ontario Sheep has worked with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and Value Chain Management International (VCMI) on an industry growth strategy. The growth strategy stems from a challenge issued by the Premier of Ontario (while Minister of Agriculture) to the Ontario agri food industry to double its annual growth rate and create 120,000 jobs by 2020. The goal is to increase the industry's competitiveness and was developed after seeking input from across the value chain.

The resulting strategy is being called EweGROW, and is designed to increase the availability of Ontario lamb to meet increasing consumer demand for the product. Given the spread between what the market demand for Ontario lamb is and what is supplied, there is growth opportunity in Ontario for the sheep industry.

One of the key findings from the report is the need for benchmarking – a baseline in performance from which growth can be measured and the impact of management decisions monitored. A key component of benchmarking is record keeping. By measuring productivity, the entire value chain is able to track their production, and continually improve their business operations in unison – enabling them to become more efficient and capitalize on the growth opportunities that are available for Ontario lamb.

The value of benchmarking is indicated by leading lamb producing nations (including New Zealand, Australia and the UK) having invested in extensive benchmarking and reporting practices for decades, and utilizing the resulting knowledge to achieve long-term benefits for individual farmers and the wider industry.

Record keeping at the farm level

There is tremendous value in data – knowing where your business started, and comparing that to where your business is now. It is a powerful tool that helps you make decisions that benefit your business and ultimately could make it more profitable, by enabling you to determine exactly what is impacting performance over time, and why. It also allows you to compare your business to the wider industry, and thus gives you an indication of where you are in comparison to your peers.

However, the lack of data collection and reporting in the sheep industry is hindering its ability to grow and meet increasing demand for the product it produces.

One of the tactics that can help establish benchmarks for the industry, and give an indication of where it is in terms of performance, is collecting and recording data on the farm.

As an example, do you know, on average, how many lambs per ewe are born in your flock? What is your lamb mortality rate? How many lambs survive to market weight and age? All of this and other data is important when making decisions around the management of your flock – which ewes to cull, which ewe lambs to keep for breeding purposes, which ram sires lambs that perform the best.

If you don't have this information recorded, how can you determine if you're making the right decisions for your farm business? For your flock? For your customers?

There's also value in keeping records for finances – cost of production, expense ratios for operating costs, machinery costs, and income. The financial health of sheep farming businesses here in Ontario is vital to maintain and increase the competitiveness of the industry with other jurisdictions in the world. If more farm businesses are making money raising sheep, those farm operators are more likely to stay in the industry, grow their flocks, and market more lamb. This results in more Ontario lamb being available to fill the market demand for the product.

Managing data

One of the overwhelming challenges of data is that once it is collected, what do you do with it? Data reporting and analysis is essential for it to be beneficial. One of the challenges that the study also found was the need to establish common language and reporting tools that the entire value chain can use for competitive advantage.

The information flow along the value chain needs to travel both ways – from the farmer to the processor and vice versa. Carcass data, provided by processors, can help sheep farmers make decisions around which animals are providing the highest quality and most valuable product. A consistent and predictable supply of lambs possessing desired carcass traits helps processors supply consumers with a high-quality product that they want.

The EweGROW initiative will be launched at the Ontario Sheep Convention – Thursday, October 26 and Friday, October 27, 2017. The Thursday program of the Convention is built around the initiative – what it is, why it's important, and how you as a sheep farmer can benefit from being a part of it. The program will include a presentation on the findings of the study.

More information about the Ontario Sheep Convention is in this issue of the Ontario Sheep News starting on page 16.

For a full copy of the report findings, contact the Ontario Sheep office.

Funding for this project was provided by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. **OSN**