

# Piloting Sheep Flock Health Clubs in Ontario

Ontario Sheep has partnered with an Ontario veterinarian for a pilot project to determine the feasibility of establishing sheep flock health clubs around the province, using the model that exists for similar clubs in the United Kingdom.

The pilot project is being delivered in partnership with Dufferin Veterinary Services - Dr. Rex Crawford, using a small number of sheep farmers in southern Ontario. After completing the pilot project, including a thorough evaluation, the goal is to offer course materials, information, and a successful model that can then be established across the province.

The objectives of the project are to demonstrate the role that veterinarians can play as a part of a farm management team, provide a cost effective delivery model for veterinary services by veterinarians who are interested and trained in sheep flock health, increase Ontario's sheep flock productivity and profitability, and improve the health and welfare of the Ontario sheep industry.

During the pilot phase of the project, the size of the clubs are kept to a small number of producers – usually under 10 – to allow for maximum interaction and information exchange. The clubs' membership consists of a group of producers who have similar sheep businesses, knowledge, and business goals. The discussion is facilitated by a veterinarian, with opportunities for input and strategies from flock health club member sheep farmers also provided. Topics are determined by both the veterinarian and the members of the club. For

example, one pilot sheep flock health club spent a meeting discussing reproductive health and strategies for increasing conception rates when using out of season breeding.

## Improving On-farm Productivity

While veterinarians are an important part of a farmer's management team, there are barriers to having a veterinarian-client relationship. Knowing where to go and which veterinarians offer services and advice for sheep can be a challenge. There is also a perception amongst some that the cost of using a veterinarian may be too expensive for the benefit it could provide.

Using a monthly subscription as a model, sheep farmers can get access to cost effective veterinary advice, with the subscription fees providing income for veterinarians. It also reduces the challenge of farmers trying to find a knowledgeable and willing veterinarian to work with their sheep flocks.

Members of the pilot flock health clubs are also providing information and data on conception rates, prolificacy, and the number of lambs weaned for example, as a way to establish benchmarks and help determine the productivity of their flocks. They can then use the information and materials from the veterinarian and the knowledge sharing from other producers at the flock health club to determine where improvements can be made.

There is also a benefit to the sheep industry. Improving sheep health through disease recognition, prevention, and

employing appropriate treatment will improve the health, welfare, productivity, and ultimately the profitability of sheep farms. Research has shown that healthy animals are more productive animals, which translates to more lambs making it to market and helping the industry meet the demand for Ontario lamb product.

The pilot project will continue through to the fall of 2017.

This project was funded in part through *Growing Forward 2 (GF2)*, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agricultural Adaptation Council assists in the delivery of *GF2* in Ontario. **OSN**



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