

Sheep Flock Health Club Pilot Project A Success

Lilian Schaer, Livestock Research Innovation Corporation

A project to pilot the concept of sheep flock health clubs in Ontario has just wrapped up – and its participants are keen to continue with club leader Dr. Rex Crawford of Dufferin Veterinary Services.

Modeled after a similar program in the United Kingdom, Crawford formed two small clubs, one with five participants and one with six, to help sheep producers address production issues in a group setting.

Each group met quarterly for a three hour session focused on topics Crawford selected in advance in consultation with producers. These included record-keeping, drug use, reproduction and preparing for lambing, diseases and problems with lambs, and business management topics including cost of production.

“The project was a success in that the members of the clubs are excited to continue with them,” said Crawford. “We kept the groups small to encourage group discussion – six people is about an ideal size.”

Part of the project also included developing teaching materials for other veterinarians who might wish to establish similar clubs in their areas. Crawford has just presented the concept and the project's outcomes to the Small Ruminant Veterinarians of Ontario in an effort to expand the program.

“We are currently in the planning phase of rolling out a program to all small ruminant veterinarians,” he said. “We plan to share presentation resources between veterinarians so they can run their own club and will be working over the next six months to get other veterinarians on board to start those clubs.”

According to Ontario Sheep Farmers (OSF), the club model lets sheep farmers access cost-effective veterinary advice, with the club 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.

Heather Little and her husband farm just south of Grand Valley, where they have a mixed 100-acre farm with 300 ewes and a cattle feedlot. She was one of Crawford's club participants and despite some initial trepidation about sharing her farms data with others, has found the program to be very beneficial

“I wanted to be part of this process so that I could learn more and be a better producer,” said Little. “We had to gather all of our data so we can compare against other participants. After you go a few times and you get to know the others and what obstacles they encounter, you realize you're not so different. We have all committed to staying in the club and seeing it through because we see the value in it.”

For Little, also an OSF board member, the biggest takeaway for their farm so far has come from the session on reproduction, where she learned tips on how to be more efficient with breeding and improve on the system they already have in place.


She said the drug use and information session was also valuable, where Crawford taught proper administration procedures and how to ensure producers are using the correct vaccination program for their flock.

The data sharing is an important part of establishing benchmarks for the sheep industry for things like conception rates, prolificacy, and the number of lambs weaned for example, as a way to help determine the flock productivity and identify areas for improvement.

“From the industry's perspective, a lot of government funding is subject to benchmarking and the sheep industry doesn't have a lot of that information available,” she said. “If we don't know where we are, it's hard to improve and find efficiencies to increase bottom line.” **OSN**

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