

Shropshire breeders blame health care for many sheep problems

COCHRANVILLE — Acrylics, polyesters? Many agriculturists will site artificial fibers as the primary cause of the decline in the sheep industry, but at least one group, the Pennsylvania-Maryland Shropshire Association feels that veterinary scientists through neglect have been contributors to the troubles of the sheep business.

These sheep producers want to do something about it.

If you keep sheep, the next time one of your lambs dies, you should think, "perhaps this loss didn't have to be," Annette Menhennett of the

Penn-Mar Shrop organization counsels

"You also should think about the \$70 loss to your profit ledger," she adds "It's dead lambs, culled ewes, and barren ewes that are literally destroying the sheep industry because they rob the shepherd of his profits"

Figures are hard to document, but Clair Engle, sheep specialist of Pennsylvania's Cooperative Extension Service often uses 12 to 15 percent as the rate of lamb losses in the Commonwealth's flocks. A survey done recently by the Animal Health Economics Unit of the University of

Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine found seven percent of the state's sheep population dies on the farm each year.

Infertility, loss of condition or diseases cause the shepherd to cull another 10 percent while 3.8 percent of the ewes are barren annually.

These last three figures represent a loss of 10,200 ewes each year or a potential crop of 20,000 lambs. In dollars and cents at current market prices that's a loss to our sheep producers of \$1,300,000.

If 12 percent of the lambs die before they can be marketed, this is a loss in

Pennsylvania of 7200 lambs. These lambs would bring the producers \$504,000. Together with the above losses sheep producers have lost nearly two million dollars.

The Shropshire breeders want to change this situation. Under the leadership of Annette Menhennett of Cochranville, that group has been urging the School of Veterinary Medicine to add an ovine specialist to their faculty.

On July 10, 1978 soon after the Shrop group began making overtures to the Dean of the Veterinary School, Dean Marshak acknowledged, "My faculty are only too well aware of

our deficiencies in this important area."

Since then he has repeatedly stated that the ovine position is a matter of high priority, but no funds are available to initiate this program. Similarly the Secretary of Agriculture and the Cooperative Extension Service have been unable to offer financial assistance.

In essence, Mrs. Menhennett says she feels these authorities are signing the death warrant for the sheep industry.

"You can have all kinds of 'Blueprints for Expansion', but they won't revive the industry unless the producer can make a decent profit."

One researcher, Dr. Michael Magno, who has been doing cardiovascular-pulmonary research at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in attempting to buy healthy lambs for his project has found half the animals to have pneumonia, pleural adhesions or lung abscesses.

These lambs may make it to reproductive age, but their longevity and lifetime production will be drastically shortened, and more of the producer's profits will die with them.

Consider the baby lambs that die, Mrs. Menhennett urges. Pneumonia, starvation, hypothermia (cold stress) are all expounded as the cause of death, and all are related. At least one pathologist believes there

may be predisposing factors like metritis (uterine infection of the ewe), septicemia, malnourishment of the fetus or vaginal infections of the ewe

If veterinary scientists could study these lamb deaths, new ways to prevent them might be discovered.

Most large animal practitioners acknowledge that their knowledge and training in ovine medicine has been inadequate. In fact 87 percent of those surveyed by the Animal Health Economics Unit believed the Veterinary School could improve its services to the sheep industry

There are 21 schools of veterinary medicine in the United States. According to Don E. Bailey, DVM, Secretary-Treasurer of the American Association of Sheep and Goat Practitioners, only 10 of these schools have classes and qualified instructors in sheep and goat medicine.

"For many years veterinary schools have overlooked the importance of the small ruminant, so often students feel incompetent in small ruminant practice and refuse to look at sheep and goats," Dr. Bailey says.

This sense of inadequacy is reflected in the sheepman's view of the veterinarian. The Animal Health Economics survey

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