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From the flock

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In This Issue:

1-2 Traceability

3-4 Food Safety

5 RFID

6-7 Scrapie Canada

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Traceability and the Future of Agriculture

By Sean McKenzie – National Coordinator Animal Identification and Traceability

In January of this year the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) held a Traceability Forum, where they invited a series of government and industry representatives to talk on the potential for Traceability and what some industry leaders are doing to develop their businesses and increase efficiencies.

The keynote speaker Richard Worzel, President, IF Research spoke on "Traceability and the Future of Agriculture". Overall Mr. Worzel gave a very thought provoking talk on traceability, consumer trends and demands, and the effect that technology is likely to have on the future of agriculture.

His first point was that no one can predict the future; it will come as a surprise. Often we talk of trends and use these as indicators of the future, but as Mr. Worzel points out, trends do not tell you when they are going to change. All that we can really do is stay in touch with our consumer, use what information we have available to provide a product that suits their needs, and be prepared in the event that this need shifts. Consumers today are continually becoming more aware of their health, their nutrition and consequently will be looking for the guarantees that our product meets this requirement.

He also spoke of "four dimensions of food's future"; Age, Genetic Markers, Price and Public Awareness. Firstly Age; as individuals age their demand on our health care system also increases, with the increase beginning and increasing almost exponentially from the age of about 55. Right now the Canadian population is aging and the bulk of that population, the Baby Boomers, are entering into that 55-65 year age bracket.

Traceability

This will have a dramatic impact on the health care system and put excessive financial burden onto governments. He used the example of a 2005 Ontario Ministry of Finance planning department study that stated that by 2024 over 60% of ALL of government spending will be spent on health care. What this translates to, is that over the next 15 years, government and the buying public is going to become increasingly aware of what consumers are eating and its effect on people's health. This will lead to further investigation into 'healthy' products, quality and nutritional claims that are placed on certain foods. Traceability will become a requirement for sale of product.

With every food related scare the public becomes more interested in traceability and food safety. And this interest is only being accelerated and assisted by improvements in technology. Moore's law which describes increases in computing power vs. price states that a computing power will double in power and half in price every 18 months. This has actually been shown to be incorrect as it is too conservative. Recently the term has been closer to 11-12 months, and it has been suggested that this will increase to 10, then 9 months and so on as technology and design improve. This means that in 10 years you'll be able to purchase a computer for $1000 that is 1000X more powerful than a computer that you'd buy today for $1000. All of these improvements in technology will make searching for information on food and nutrition that much simpler and if the information that the consumer wants is not available for your product, they will look, and purchase, elsewhere.

Mr. Worzel suggests then that all this leads to the big question of what can we do about it? Producers must try to think ahead, and continue to search for the next market, the next trend, or the next opportunity. Being content in doing what we are doing now and hope to be successful into the future may not be sufficient. Consumers want to be able to trust that what they are buying and eating is as good for them and for their families.

They want to know that it is being produced as the packaging suggests it is, or where it suggests, and the key to gaining and maintaining that trust is transparency. By having traceability information at our fingertips, we are prepared for the next jog in the consumer trend. It provides rapid feedback in the event of a food safety scare to either reassure the customer that the lamb they purchased yesterday is free of XX feed ingredient, or that it was grown all within 100kms of the store where they bought it. The faster we have this information, and the easier it is for the consumer to find, will only build that level of trust and continue to keep the demand for our produce at the top of the market.

Overall, Mr. Worzel certainly challenged us to consider the possibilities and potential for traceability in agriculture. Putting less emphasis on government mandates and encouraging us to think more about what a consumer might demand was a strong message throughout the talk. Having tools in place that can both support our industry and increase consumer confidence may be more of a benefit to the future of agriculture than we realize.

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TAX TIME? - An Audit for Food Safety

By Barb Caswell, Interim National Coordinator, On-Farm Food Safety

In the world of finances, the word audit can be a scary term. We get the picture from the movies of some short, bald man from the Canada Revenue Agency with his clipboard in hand, digging through seven years of paperwork. Yes, the stigma attached to the word 'audit' is evident. While an audit is required for the Food-Safe Farm Practices Program, I assure you the process is not as scary as the horrifying picture I have provided.

Once you have implemented the program, the next step is to apply for an audit. Contact your provincial sheep association or the Canadian Sheep Federation to express you intent to be audited. We will mail you out the paperwork to be returned, which formally states your intent to be audited and become certified. Once received, we will contact an auditor in your area, who will contact you directly to set up a date and time for the audit. You will need to be present during the audit to answer any questions the auditor may have or provide any missing paperwork.

The audit is a simple process – a review of the paperwork and a tour of the premises. Assuming you have spent time going through the Food-Safe Farm Practices Manual, you are likely to have little to worry about. However, to make the process as smooth and straight forward as possible, the auditor will begin with an opening meeting, an opportunity to discuss with you what they wish to see and the records they wish to review. The auditor will then proceed in the manner they have outlined for you. After the auditor has had a chance review the premises and documentation, they will need time to complete a report of the audit. Then, the auditor will meet with you once again for a closing meeting, a chance to go over the findings of the audit, areas where you may not be complying, and possibly some suggestions for meeting any shortfalls, should there be any found. Keep in mind, the auditor is there to simply assess if you are meeting all mandatory or "Must Do" practices found in the Food-Safe Farm Practices Manual, not to change you management in anyway. The outcome of the audit is up to you.

Should any shortfalls be found, you may still be able to gain certification, assuming they require simple measures to correct. Before the auditor leaves, he or she will talk over and agree to a plan of action and timeline for you to meet any areas that require additional work in order to comply. If the areas are minor, such as an animal health product not found on your inventory record, you may be able to simply fix the problem and fax a copy of the record to the auditor. However, if they auditor finds multiple areas where "Must do" practices are not being performed, you may be required at your own expense to have the audit performed a second time. Take advantage of the resources available to answer any questions you may have before you get to the point of the audit – it could save you time and money in the long run.

The biggest two questions I receive are "how much will it cost" and "how long will it take"? And I'm always afraid to give disappointing answers, but there is no single response. There is one important point to stress – be prepared! While an auditor will not be looking for the last seven years of every record – most records in the program are to be kept for two years, the more you can provide the less likely your auditor is to request something you may have to go on the hunt for. If in doubt, resort to your Food-Safe Farm Practices Manual, which outlines all the necessary information you should be keeping, either on the records provided or in some other record keeping system that contains the same information. An auditor is contracted to audit your farm and is paid by the time it takes to complete the audit. The time will be dependent on the size of your operation, the number of ewes, and most importantly, how prepared you are on the day of the audit. As a guideline, an audit on

Audit

average costs $500. As you choke back angry bursts at another cost to farming, let me raise some important points. First, it's an average and can vary – the more prepared you are and the quicker the audit, the less it will cost, particularly for smaller operations. The second is the audit cycle.

Well completing the initial audit gets you certified, we need to be sure you continue your commitment to the program. The first audit is considered a "full audit", where the auditor comes out to the farm. Successful completion of the full audit is year one. Year's two and four involve a self-declaration – a checklist of items completed and signed as a statement to your continued commitment to and compliance under the program. Year three involves a records review – a copy of a subset of your records, as specified by us, that are mailed or faxed in for review. The records review and self-declaration have minimal cost associated with them. Therefore, while $500 is a considerable expense, it is in fact spread over a four year period. Once you have completed year four, you return to the start of the cycle again, with a full-audit.

Also, many provinces currently have provincial funding available for implementation of food safety programming. While the funding differs across the provinces, some allow you to claim the cost of your audit as a cost of implementing the program. For more information on this funding, contact your provincial ministry of agriculture. A final cost-saving measure many provinces are exploring in order to decrease the cost of on-farm food safety audits is a single auditor to audit multiple commodities. Many auditors are trained to audit various on-farm food safety programs. As many farms have multiple commodities, such as grains, beef, and sheep, there may be a possibility, in implementing food-safety in more than one commodity, to having a single auditor perform audits for each on-farm food safety program during a single visit. Hence, this limits the need for multiple visits each with an associated cost.

Again, the resources are many to help you implement the program. In taking advantage of those resources, including the Canadian Sheep Federation, the audit is simply a step of verifying your compliance and investing in your business.

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RFID TAGS … more interesting debate

By Susan Hosford, ARD

Producers in Alberta and Canada are learning to use electronic management systems – RF ID tags are part of those systems. A short few years ago the debate was solely on the cost of RF ID tags. New approved tags and expanding market demand have helped reduce costs significantly.

As more sheep get RF ID tags, the debates are over the 'best' tags, easy to use tags, tag application technique, how long tags stay in ears, or maybe, why do you need a different applicator for every tag type. Those debates really have been going on for as long as we've been tagging sheep. New to the debate is the 'dud' RF ID tag, the tag that 'occasionally doesn't read', or 'seems not to read'.

Now, there is opinion and there is accurate information – not always the same. The Alberta pilot project has about 100,000 tags on sheep since 2007. Pretty new at this, but we have yet to definitely identify a tag (transponder) that doesn't read, or reads poorly when compared to one that reads properly. Tag readability problems have been the tag reader (transceiver), electronic interference, the person operating the tag reader, or a tag that has been damaged, maybe while trying to 'recycle it'. Yes, we humans will tamper with anything that says 'tamper resistant'.

So is there a definitive answer to 'will the transponder wear out before the sheep does'? I contacted Mark Tereszczak, one of the European members of the ISO/ICAR expert panel working on electronic tag and reader standards. The short answer … 'it all depends'.

Tags (transponders) are not all built the same. Some have faulty engineering to begin with, some develop faults over time, some have faulty components and some are damaged at some time in the life of the tag. Extensive testing is done so tags meet international standards. The ISO (International Standards Organization) website lists tags that have gone through testing for extreme heat, extreme cold, humidity, shock, vibration, etc. All Canadian Sheep Identification Program (CSIP) approved tags must be ISO/ICAR approved and must be farm-tested using Canada testing protocols.

CSIP approved RF ID tags should read for as long the sheep lives. RFID tags are 'asleep' until a reader activates them. There are no moving parts to wear out. 'Sleepy' or 'lazy' tags are most often a result of humidity getting into the tag. Humidity is the great enemy of all electronics. Some tags have components embedded in plastic, water can permeate plastic. Some tags use a glass capsule to keep out humidity. Glass capsules can be cracked. When we found readability issues in training sessions it was because we were using more than one handheld reader, or there was a panel reader and a handheld reader. Transmission signals interfere with each other so none of the readers worked as well. We found the same problems with electrical interference at the lamb processor.

In short, approved tags will read for the lifetime of the sheep as long as they are used properly and haven't been damaged. So before you take the stories of 'dodgy' tags seriously – get proof. If a tag doesn't read well when all others do and the situation is identical then, maybe, we talk 'dud' tags.

New Scrapie Funding Approved

On February 6, 2010, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada approved funding the National TSE Eradication Plan, a project to be administered by the Canadian Sheep Federation, the Canadian Sheep Breeders' Association and the Canadian National Goat Federation.

A total of $4.5 million was allocated for a three year study that will focus on determining scrapie prevalence in the Canadian sheep flock and goat herd and the continuation of the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (VSFCP). The actual project activities are expected to be launched in the next month or so and there will be some new reimbursements available for producers enrolled on the VSFCP. An announcement will be made as soon as the details are worked out.

The objectives of the National TSE Eradication Plan are:

- To determine scrapie prevalence in the Canadian sheep flock and goat herd.
- To enable the establishment of a clear time frame in which scrapie can be eradicated from Canada and after the OIE-recommended seven-year monitoring period, have Canada internationally recognized as scrapie free.
- To develop a business plan to allow the Canadian sheep industry and the Canadian goat industry to work closely together on program elements that contribute to the control and eradication of TSE's in Canada.
- To administer the National Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program.

The beneficiaries of the National TSE Eradication Plan include:

- Canada's sheep and goat producers.
- Canadian sheep/ goat industry associations and federal/ provincial governments who are interested in remaining competitive in international markets.
- All livestock producers in Canada with an interest in trading livestock with international markets.

This project will determine scrapie prevalence in the Canadian sheep flock and enable the establishment of a clear time frame in which scrapie can be eradicated from Canada. The long-term goal would then be to have Canada recognized internationally as scrapie free after the OIE-recommended seven-year monitoring period. Gaining a status of scrapie free is necessary for Canada to remain competitive in international markets. It will also have a direct impact on maintaining a trading relationship with the U.S. in terms of small ruminants. The U.S. has invested $120 million in scrapie eradication since 2001 and has declared that their country will be scrapie free by 2017. In order to continue a trading relationship with the U.S., Canada must take similar strides.

The project will allow for the development of a business plan specifically focusing on TSE eradication, which will benefit Canadian sheep and goat producers, as well as the Canadian agriculture industry as a whole. The business plan will emphasize risk-management and disease monitoring, thereby contributing to the eradication of TSE's. The Canadian sheep and goat industries will work together on this plan sharing resources, time and money. Furthermore, information related to TSE's will also be shared, increasing cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

The continuation of the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program compliments Canada's progression towards TSE eradication. In terms of the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program, Canadian sheep and goat producers enrolled on this program are required to close their flocks/ herds and complete annual scrapie surveillance. Participating on this program also allows producers to maintain access to international trading partners, including the U.S.

Finally, the continuation of the program will serve to provide confidence to the international community in Canadian sheep and goat breeding stock, genetics and milk products.

The results of this project will benefit the Canadian sheep and goat industries. The first step in eradicating scrapie from Canada is determining its prevalence and secondly, a business plan can be developed focusing on gaining scrapie eradication. Full eradication will save the Canadian agriculture government and industries millions of dollars annually. Reports out of the U.S. have indicated that scrapie costs the country approximately $20 million/ year. The reduction and elimination of scrapie from Canada would also reduce or prevent the destruction and disposal of scrapie infected flocks/herds, which are costly and present animal welfare concerns to both the Canadian livestock sector and consuming public. As well, control and eradication of all TSE's in Canada is also vital to the health and trade of all livestock commodities. And finally, by enabling producers to implement risk mitigation measures for scrapie, the private insurance sector might be more willing to consider re-insurance of residual financial risk.