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From the flock

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER FOR THE CANADIAN SHEEP INDUSTRY

In This Issue:

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Your questions on mandatory Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags

By Dwane Morvik, Chairman Canadian Sheep Federation

As of January 1, 2012, the only thing that a producer is required to do is change the tags (and taggers) they are purchasing to RFID tags. The Shearwell data set tags are $1.80 the Allflex button tags are $2.98 and the Allflex pair tag (button tag + dangle tag) are $3.48.

I've heard from many producers since the Canadian Sheep Federation (CSF) announced its decision to support the decommissioning of visual identification ear tags in favour of mandatory Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags. I've told the producers I've spoken with that there are a number of factors that led to the decision, such as the federal government's call for mandatory traceability by 2011. The CSF believes that RFID is the best system currently available to provide traceability and it will deliver benefits for producers and stakeholders.

In this article, I would like to address some of the questions I've encountered in my discussions. I won't be able to address all your questions here, but please feel free to contact me. You can look for further articles on RFID in future issues of From the Flock as well as CSF's monthly Points of View.

QUESTION 1

Why can't we use any of our current tag options? Why are RFID tags the only choice?

Moving towards a national traceability system with the current non-RFID tag options will have limitations. The only really good thing about the steel CSIP tag was the price, period. Other options such as group lot identification have been explored, but given the small number of lambs in the industry, we can't make it happen. RFID tags are more efficient and minimize errors. Additionally, for those that are interested, RFID technology also gives us the ability to enhance production management, and efficiency on our farms.

QUESTION 2

Given that the average flock size is 50 ewes shouldn't we be evaluating technology that better fits this size of operation?

The average size of the Canadian, according to the 2006 census, is 99 ewes. CSF is currently evaluating a range of flock sizes – from 72 to 5,000 head – in the National RFID Pilot Project. We have applied for additional funding, and if approved, we'll be looking to expand the number of sheep producers on the project and include more small flocks.

QUESTION 3

How much will it cost to incorporate RFID technology into my farm?

When it comes to adopting RFID management systems, there are several approaches that producers can take. As of January 1, 2012, the only thing that a producer is required to do is change the tags (and taggers) they are purchasing to RFID tags. The Shearwell data set tags are $1.80 the Allflex button tags are $2.98 and the Allflex pair tag (button tag + dangle tag) are $3.48.

The CSF has just completed a technical brochure that outlines the costs and considerations producers need to consider when making these decisions. The brochure is available from CSF. Additionally, the CSF is investigating other tags that are less expensive that may serve the function of a shipping tag for those producers selling butcher lamb locally or shipping large lots of feeder lambs.

QUESTION 4

As a producer, how can RFID tags put more money in my pocket?

It delivers what stakeholders require from us to continue producing lamb in an evolving and ever-demanding food system. For some producers, the introduction of mandatory RFID tags will be an increased production cost. But for the industry as a whole it will help ensure producers are able to maintain markets. There is the potential, through the implementation of RFID systems, for producers to better their bottom line by culling poor producing ewes/lambs through the use of RFID in easier and faster data recording. CSF is committed to adopting the most cost-effective system that gives producers the opportunity to benefit from improved management decisions based on the information the RFID system provides. You'll hear more about this in the weeks and months ahead as information is gleaned from our RFID Pilot Project.

QUESTION 5

How will RFID technology contribute to the sustainability of our industry?

Once instituted, RFID technology will be a tremendous benefit to our industry. We'll have an effective traceability system that will allow us to respond quickly and effectively to the potential harmful impact of foreign animal disease as well as any food safety issues that could threaten our industry. The RFID system also has the potential to improve sheep production efficiency and productivity, giving producers the opportunity to meet more of our growing domestic market that is hungry for Canadian lamb.

QUESTION 6

Were the potential challenges that mandatory RFID tags could present to small producers given due consideration in the decision to adopt the technology?

Small producers are a vital part of the Canadian sheep industry and CFS is taking every possible step to ensure that the move to mandatory RFID tags has a minimal financial impact on small producers. There isn't an ID system out there that meets every producers needs regardless of what type of livestock they produce. However, we do need traceability at all levels of the industry to address the needs of stakeholders – from consumers to retailers, processors and government. I also encourage producers to look at RFID as an opportunity rather than a cost – an opportunity to improve your production management and benefit from improved management decisions.

QUESTION 7

What do I do with my current inventory of tags?

CSF knows that many producers have inventories of non-RFID tags. That's why we thought it was important to make producers aware of the decision to decommission these tags as quickly as possible. Producers will have until the end of 2012 to use their non-RFID tags. Animals bearing non-RFID tags will be accepted by abattoirs or the CFIA as official tags until December 31, 2012. After this time, all sheep and lambs must bear one of the two official CSIP RFID tags – the Allflex button or Shearwell Data SET tag.

QUESTION 8

Could there have been more consultation with producers for their input on the decision to adopt mandatory RFID tags?

CSF is structured to represent the interests of all Canadian producers. Our Board of Directors includes producers from across the country who represent the provincial organizations that make up the CSF.

It's difficult for CSF board members to consult with every producer in Canada on every single issue, but the board and provincial associations have worked hard on the traceability issue and we believe our decision is based on a strong understanding of our producers, industry stakeholders as well as consumer demands. Unfortunately, one size does not fit all, but for the sheep industry, RFID management systems are the best option that fit key needs at this time.

QUESTION 9

Shouldn't CSF be doing more to encourage local agriculture, which helps maintain producers' control over production?

Local agriculture is successful, in large part, because it addresses traceability issues –consumers know and see where the food is coming from and there isn't usually a problem or an issue. In a country the size of Canada, lambs could be grazing in Alberta pastures on a Monday and on a Toronto café plate by Saturday night. With mandatory RFID tags, we will now have the capability to provide that same traceability for both local and national markets to sustain and grow all of our markets. Not only does it fulfill end users needs it also gives growers some security in the food business buy providing a history of our product, lamb.

Funding for this initiative has been provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada through the Canadian Integrated Food Safety Initiative under Growing Forward.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
Agriculture et Agroalimentaire Canada
Growing Forward

UK Shepherd Discusses RFID Benefits

By Jennifer MacTavish, Executive Director Canadian Sheep Federation

Canadian shepherds are currently expressing concern about their profitability, especially in light of the recent announcement for mandatory RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags on January 1, 2012. This concern is echoed by producers world-wide and was something that Peter Baber, addressed in his presentation to sheep producers at the Alberta Sheep Field Days in July.

Baber a sheep producer from the United Kingdom (UK) farms up to 1,400 ewes; 1,100 of which are fully recorded. He keeps commercial ewes and pedigree ewes that are performance recorded, on land that he currently rents from 10 landlords. His flock consists of Suffolks, Texels, Frieslands and Exlana.

His farming philosophy is that his sheep must keep him, stating that "they are not a hobby, I keep sheep to earn a living" and, as such, his enterprise must be profitable. To ensure profitability Baber aims to increase outputs and reduce inputs. Increasing outputs for him means to increase both value and volume. To increase value he focuses on improving carcass quality and differentiating between breeding stock and slaughter stock. To increase volume he focuses on increasing the number of lambs sold per ewe, weight of lambs and ewe numbers.

To reduce inputs, Baber strives to breed and keep sheep that are easy to manage and require as little intervention as possible. This means minimal assistance at lambing, no routine antibiotics, no creep feeding (this is the UK where they have great grazing and lamb in May, not 'forage growing season challenged' western Canada.) and minimal drenching.

For this to be successful though the flock needs to be constantly monitored and accurate records need to be kept. Records are an integral component to his decision making and include: matings; non-routine treatments (e.g. drench); weights (at 8 and 20 weeks and at mating) and; lambing (ease of birth). In the past Baber has tried ear notches, coloured tags, notebooks and now he uses electronic identification.

Currently in the UK all sheep over 12 months of age need to be identified with an RFID tag, however, producers can sell lambs direct to an abattoir without an RFID tag. Throughout the EU every time a producer brings an animal onto a farm they need to record where it came from. In discussing RFID technology, Baber indicated that when he was first exposed to it he was reasonably computer literate, and that while he could use a mobile phone, he hated getting a new one. Even still, there was a learning curve and it took him awhile to get comfortable with the technology, indicating that when he first joined an RFID trial in the UK he ran a paper system along with an electronic system until he trusted the new system; this lasted 6 months.

Baber now touts the benefits of electronic identification as a management tool to improve what is done on-farm, or as a breeding selection tool. For example, it allows a producer to conduct multiple actions at pregnancy scanning including weighing and condition scoring and assignment to a specific group. The system will also provides the ability to evaluate and compare ewe production based on lambs sold, which means producers can cull ewes that are "coasting".

UK RFID Benefits

Additionally the RFID systems allow Baber to draft, or sort, animals at the time of handling into groups based on breed lines, sire, weight, gender or if they are cull animals. At lambing, the system allows producers to automatically identify the ewe and record lambing or mothering traits including lambing ease, milk at birth, lamb vigour and mothering ability. When weighing animals, producers can see how much weight the lambs are gaining which allows them to better predict when they will be ready to ship. Data collection is now fast, accurate and cheaper; especially if producers count their time.

Given this, he also clearly indicated that that to be able to use records to improve carcass quality from RFID tags producers need to have the cooperation of abattoirs. Processors must be prepared to pay both a premium and penalties for lamb quality. The hitch in the UK though is that many abattoirs are reluctant to do this because they cannot afford for producers to supply another packer.
Financial Benefits

Prior to the UK's Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001, the sheep sector was profitable and self-sufficient in lamb production. Throughout the 1990`s the average carcass price for a lamb was $1.60-1.80/lb. However, after 2001, both the number of ewes and the industry's profitability declined.

Baber indicated that although prices are currently high (just recently averaging CDN$4.80/lb), the weak British pound is impacting trade with the European Union (EU). A weak pound leads to increased price and ability to increase exports, but they also have to compete with imports.

Like the Canadian market there is a growing ethnic population in the UK that is a major market for lamb and old ewes, and a shrinking ewe population throughout the EU. Ten years ago, the industry was self-sufficient producing 360,000 tonnes of lamb from 20 million ewes, although they did export close to one-third of it and brought lamb in from New Zealand. Current estimates have the UK flock at 14.5 million ewes.

Even with prices peaking, the average UK producer runs a loss of approximately $7.00/ewe before they pay themselves. This is in comparison to the top 1/3 of EBLEX producers who profit approximately $40/ewe. The only thing that keeps most sheep producers afloat is the EU subsidy.

Since implementing an RFID system Baber estimates that he has saved CDN$2,400-3200 in his time alone. Additionally his farm output has increased by approximately 1% per year worth an estimated CDN$0.81-1.62 per ewe/year. Indicating that these are cumulative gains, he estimates that the net benefit to his operation of RFID technology is CDN$4,000-4,800 in the first year and growing.

EBLEX is the organisation for beef and lamb levy payers in England. They aim to enhance the profitability and sustainability of the English beef and lamb sectors.

On-Farm Food Safety – An International Movement!

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

Source: Meat and Livestock Australia Livestock Production Assurance Program, http://www.mla.com.au/Meat-safety-and-traceability/On-farm-assurance/LPA, accessed August 3, 2010.

Some of you may be asking, 'Why is Canada so persistent about on-farm food safety?' While many commodities on an international basis have not made on-farm food safety mandatory, they have recognized it as a desire of consumers. I haven't used the word 'demand', as demand implies the consumer is willing to pay an increased cost, which is not always the case for food safety (or at least not yet). However, what the Canadian Sheep Federation has realized is that food safety is something the consumer is interested in, aware of, and a focus of many of our biggest competitors.

First, let's look local. Domestically, almost all of the major food producing livestock commodities have developed, and are in various stages of implementing on-farm food safety programs. Some of the supply managed commodities have even made on-farm food safety programming mandatory in certain provinces. Dairy cattle and poultry (i.e. chicken – broilers, breeders, hatching egg producers; table egg producers; and, turkey) all have on-farm food safety programs developed by the national commodity organizations. Most of the major non-supply managed commodities also have voluntary on-farm food safety programs available to their producers. These include sheep, beef, goats, bison, aquaculture, pigs and veal.

On-farm food safety programs have been recognized by industry as a necessary means to help assure consumer safety, and this has been supported by the federal and provincial governments through the development of various funding programs to help with their development and implementation.

Apart from the ability to assure consumer safety, the need to have on-farm food safety programs in Canada has been necessitated by the need to remain competitive in the global market. Recently, the Canadian sheep industry has been focused on growth in order to capture a larger share of our own domestic market. Unlike commodities such as beef and pork, the current need for on-farm food safety lies not in gaining access to international markets, but in competing with those countries who are importing lamb into Canada. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States all have varying forms of on-farm food safety programming in place.

Processors in Canada, under the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, have long been required to have food safety programs based on Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP). As with our own HACCP-based program, part of that system is trying to ensure safe inputs. As implementation of on-farm food safety programming grows, processors will have more ability to 'select' those inputs that can satisfy similar food safety requirements. On-farm food safety programming implemented today may be the key to, in the future, maintaining the increased market share we obtain.

On that note, I thought I would take this chance to briefly look at and compare our Food Safe Farm Practices Program to one of the on-farm food safety programs of a major competitor.

Food Safety continued

Part of this article is a conscious effort to inform you that, in developing our program, CSF is aware of the programming used by our competitors and, it is important in creating our program, that we are not creating unnecessary cost and lost efficiency on the part of Canadian producers. Most programs are described on commodity websites.

Australian producers use the Livestock Production Assurance (LPA) Scheme, created by the Livestock and Meat Council of Australia, as a way to verify information producers were required to provide buyers related directly to food safety. The food safety standard of the LPA consists of a Food Safety Management Module made up of five elements:

1. Property risk assessment, to ensure livestock are not exposed to areas that may be contaminated with persistent chemicals.
2. Safe and responsible animal treatments, to ensure livestock do not contain unacceptable chemical residues or physical hazards.
3. Stock foods, fodder crops, grain and pasture treatments, to ensure livestock are not exposed to contaminated feeds containing animal products and/or unacceptable chemical residues.
4. Preparation for dispatch of livestock, to ensure transported livestock are fit, not unduly stressed and contamination is minimized during loading and transport.
5. Livestock transactions and movements, to ensure the movement of livestock can be traced, if required, and that the chemical residue/food safety status of livestock accompanies them.

While the breakdown is not exactly the same, I immediately realized the familiarity between the areas addressed in the LPA and the sections of the Food Safe Farm Practices (FSFP) Program. The elements given above represent standards with associated outcomes to help assure a safe product.

The outcomes in the LPA would be comparable to the food safety concerns we have addressed in the FSFP Program, except that in the LPA, an outcome represents the safe conditions while a food safety concern in the FSFP Program identifies the unsafe condition.

A guide book is provided which addresses each element, what you need to do and practical ways to address it. The 'what you need to do' and practical ways to address the elements would represent the good production practices associated with that element, and are given as a checklist to allow producers to check off each point that applies to their farm as it is being implemented. At the end of each element, the evidence is given again as a checklist and any required paperwork or documentation. We can use a specific example to get a better idea of how the requirements compare to our own program.

Take, for example, the second element of 'Safe and responsible animal treatments'. The desired outcome for this element is to implement systems to ensure treatments are administered in a safe and responsible manner, to minimize the risk of chemical residues and physical hazards. The 'What you need to do component' addresses, among others:

- Using trained staff;
- Following 'legal' directions on a label or prescription; and,
- Keeping a record of treatments.

Food Safety continued

The record of treatments provided with the program combines much of the information you would find on our Animal Health Product Treatment record with some of the information found on the medicated feed inventory.
The 'Ways to demonstrate compliance' further elaborate on the above, with:

- Having a current user's certificate;
- Proper restraint;
- Reading labels;
- Accuracy of equipment; and,
- Storage and disposal

Upon reading all of the requirements of these two sections, they are extremely similar to and address most of the good production practices found in Section A1. Animal Health Products of our FSFP Program, including the record keeping requirements.

If we go further in the program to the next section on feed, again similarities exist in the areas identified as important to addressing the element:

- Training for administering medicated feeds;
- Storage of chemicals;
- Proper use of chemicals used to treat feeds/ pastures;
- Identification and storage of feeds;
- Records of pasture treatments; and,
- Maintaining feed invoices.

While this is only a few examples of the various activities or good production practices addressed by the LPA program as they relate to stock foods, fodder crops, grain and pasture treatments, many if not all of these practices are similar to those found in Section A2. Feed, Water and Bedding and A4. General Farm Management of the FSFP program.

While my review of the program went as far as reading the entire manual provided to producers to implement the LPA program, the examples I have provided here provide a fairly clear picture of the similarity between the two programs. Contrary to any differences in production that may exist between Canada and Australia, identifying threats to food safety that can exist on-farm has lead the industries to identify many of the similar threats.

If you wish to read further about the Livestock Production Assurance Program, I encourage you to go to the Meat and Livestock Australia website. In competing with Australian producers for a share of our domestic market, I hope producers find it reassuring to know that our current program is similar to the programs being implemented by producers elsewhere in the world, and this will provide you with some subtle encouragement that, as our competitors increase implementation, we too should be focusing on getting this program on our farms. Hopefully in the future, we can from time to time address a few of the specific food safety programs used by our competitors to keep you on top of what is out there, as well as to demonstrate that the CSF is working to create programming of equal or greater market value for the Canadian sheep and lamb producer.

Funding for this initiative has been provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada through the Canadian Integrated Food Safety Initiative under Growing Forward.

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Growing Forward

Scrapie Canada's New Project

By Courtney Denard, National Scrapie Coordinator

Scrapie Canada is pleased to announce the official start of its next project. This three year, industry driven project will support the development and implementation of a National Scrapie Prevalence Study and support the continuation of the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (VSFCP).

NATIONAL SCRAPIE PREVALENCE STUDY

The goal of National Scrapie Prevalence Study is to determine scrapie prevalence in the Canadian sheep flock. The national goat herd is not included in the prevalence portion of study at this time but project developers are working with the industry to ensure their inclusion at a future date.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) - who is partnering on the project - will collect and test 15,000 brain and lymph node samples from mature sheep slaughtered in abattoirs across Canada. This sample size was based on a statistically valid percentage of the Canadian ewe flock as of 2008.

The intention is to accurately represent the geographical distribution of the sheep population in Canada, therefore, all large, and most medium, adult sheep slaughtering facilities are included in the project. Samples will be collected from different abattoirs on different days, which will be determined randomly. Final results of the study will be compiled by CFIA and analyzed with assistance from experts from the University of Guelph.

With the completion of the prevalence study, the Canadian Sheep Federation (CSF) anticipates the establishment of a clear time frame in which scrapie can be eradicated from Canada. Once eradication has been achieved, the OIE requires a further seven-year scrapie free monitoring period prior to Canada being able to declare itself free from scrapie.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) have already conducted a national slaughter surveillance study and established national and regional scrapie prevalence. The U.S. implemented the first phase of their accelerated national scrapie eradication program in 2001 and is working to be recognized as scrapie free by 2017. The Canadian sheep and goat industries have been working to harmonize with the U.S. on scrapie related issues to remove trade barriers that currently exist. Completing the scrapie prevalence study and working towards scrapie eradication is in line with the strategy currently undertaken by the U.S.

VOLUNTARY SCRAPIE FLOCK CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The continuation of the VSFCP allows elite flocks / herds in Canada to gain status and international recognition as scrapie free establishments. In the future these flocks may become internationally recognized as a scrapie free compartment ahead of the eradication of scrapie from Canada as a whole.

Canadian sheep and goat producers enrolled on this program are required to work with a scrapie accredited veterinarian, close their flocks/ herds and complete annual scrapie monitoring and surveillance.

Scrapie Canada continued

Participation on the VSFCP also should allow producers to access to international trading partners, including the U.S.

The following new subsidies will be available for enrolled producers:

- $100 per year towards the cost of the annual veterinarian inventory visit.
- Scrapie brain testing (at designated laboratories) will be paid for by the program.
- $110 towards the cost of hiring a veterinarian to come to the farm to remove a brain sample meant for scrapie brain testing.
- $20 per shipment to send scrapie brain samples to designated laboratories.

Funding will also be allocated for project administration, communication and promotion.

BENEFITS TO THE INDUSTRY

As mentioned above, the completion of a National Scrapie Prevalence Study and continuing support of the VSFCP allows Canada to progress towards scrapie eradication and continue to harmonize with the U.S. to remove trade barriers that currently exist.

Full scrapie 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 per year.

The reduction and elimination of scrapie from Canada will also reduce, or prevent, the destruction and disposal of scrapie infected flocks/herds, which are costly and present animal welfare concerns to the Canadian livestock sector and public.

Funding for this project is provided through Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's (AAFC) AgriFlexibility program. Opinions expressed in this document are those of the CSF and not necessarily those of AAFC.

Electronic tags 'a must' to boost store lamb sales

Source: www.farminguk.com

All Britain's sheep producers who are planning to sell store lambs at livestock auction markets this year are being urged to ensure that their 2010 lamb crop are all identified with single electronic slaughter tags to meet the new legislation and to increase sales opportunities.

"EID is essential for producers to maximise their chances of selling their stock to advantage, as well as to comply with the new rules," says Peter Kingwill, an auctioneer for Hobbs Parker at Ashford Market in Kent and a member of the Livestock Auctioneers Association (LAA).

"Buyers are just not going to be interested in buying lambs for fattening, if the animals are not electronically tagged. It is too much hassle for them to identify large numbers of animal manually," he said. Mr Kingwill was speaking as the UK sheep sector faced up to its first major EID challenge at the autumn sales this year.

LAA chairman Alastair Sneddon, who is managing partner for Bagshaws at Bakewell Market and has been selling stock in the Peak District for the past 30 years, pointed out that livestock auction markets were all doing their best to ensure that the new legislation worked properly and helped rather than hindered trade during the coming season.

"We know that there has been a lot of controversy over this new EU Directive, but it is here now and the LAA believes that if we all work hard together we can ensure it has a positive effect, rather than a detrimental one, on the industry.

Auction marts throughout the UK have already devoted a great deal of time and effort, as well as money, into making the EID system as easy as possible for producers to live with - and to ensure that it does not disrupt the important autumn sales programme."

Auctioneers at Ashford Mart expect to handle between 80,000 and 100,000 store lambs and breeding ewes between August and November and Mr Kingwill believes EID will make things much easier for everybody.

"It's difficult to trace all the sheep manually and the market has invested several thousand pounds in new equipment and software, as well as training for staff to cater for EID on a large scale. We have also invested a great deal of time and effort in explaining the importance of fitting single electronic tags to store lambs sold for fattening," says Mr Kingwill.

"We want them to understand that purchasers represent a variety of markets and EID makes it much easier for them to source and identify animals for different outlets. EID offers them greater flexibility and they are more likely to buy sheep that have them.

"Yes, farmers could do all the ID work themselves at home, but markets can save farmers investing in their own equipment and we will do it all for them when they get to the market. All the producers need to do is make sure they fit electronic tags to their sheep," he adds.

Ashford Market is an approved Central Point Recording Centre and the staff have all the necessary equipment to scan all the pens rapidly to ID the sheep and then we can easily email all the read information straight back to the relevant producers. "It can save so much time and money if all the sheep are properly tagged," explains Mr Kingwill.

"Vendors need to understand the implications that the single 50p electronic tag in their lambs will have for the finished animals when they come off another holding - and they must remember their lambs will probably be all mixed up when they are sold," he added.

Electronic ID pays off in sheep, problems remain

Source: Barara Duckworth, www.producer.com

Ronald den Broeder can sit at his laptop and learn more about his 900 ewes than he ever imagined was possible. He is one of 48 Alberta farmers who volunteered to test an electronic identification and trace-back system for sheep. All Canadian sheep must be individually identified by 2012.

Alberta Agriculture is running a pilot program, while another one is conducted nationally. Volunteers have concluded the system needs work before it can be adopted by all producers. "Manufacturers don't know each other's equipment, so making them compatible on the farm is a chore," den Broeder said at a recent demonstration day at Olds College.

He has had compatibility problems with readers, scales and software.The system has reduced the amount of time he spends on management work, but he found it frustrating to learn. The entire package is also costly, although government provides some of the equipment. However, he found that the speed of the system has its advantages as it records weight gains and health treatments and compares lambing records. It has also helped him sort through the hundreds of ewes he bought from seven farms to give him a more consistent flock. Every animal on his farm now has a history entered into the system. His experiences are not unique, said sheep specialist Sue Hosford of Alberta Agriculture. The on-farm tests have found that manufacturers of radio frequency identification systems promise more than can be delivered, while computer support in rural areas is often lacking.

The researchers have also discovered that most companies build components for an identification system but few build entire systems. There are also problems with computer compatibility, she said.

RFID systems are sold to producers as whole flock management systems rather than simple identification with unique numbers assigned to individuals.

The trials have tested the programs for practicality and attempted to determine whether they will work properly on a farm and provide useful information that allows producers to make production changes.

"It is not good enough for 48 people to know how to do this," Hosford said. The system tested in the pilot program can provide individual identification, sex, weight gains, parentage and carcass information that is stored in a central database called Sheep Central.

Sunterra Meats, a federal sheep plant at Innisfail, Alta., has added the system to its facility so it can provide carcass information to producers. Other countries are already using electronic systems.

Peter Baber of Exeter, England, has 1,100 ewes on his farm and adopted electronic technology in 2005 to improve the flock. He receives individual performance information that allows him to know the number of lambs born to each ewe as well as assess weight gains and health treatments. "I hate technology," he said. However, such a large flock of mostly pedigreed animals required an efficient record keeping system beyond his old paper records.

Baber was able to look at the spreadsheets and determine which ewes were among the top third and which animals were at or below average. He is able to see which ones need more veterinary care and make better informed culling decisions. "Electronic identification has certainly made my life easier. The power of this thing is incredible," Baber said.

EID Pays Off

He can weigh 300 to 400 animals per hour because they run through a chute where a scanner embedded in the side panels reads ear tags.

The system then automatically opens a series of gates to sort the lambs by weight, sex or other preferred category.

It also has a hand held reader with a keypad so Baber can record information in the field. "Anyway you can think of to divide your sheep out, the machine will do it automatically," he said. "I'm breeding better quality sheep for the future with the same inputs."

Electronic identification is mandatory in the United Kingdom for all lambs older than 12 months.

Baber approves of the Alberta trials, which allow farmers to test the equipment before it becomes mandatory. "We never had the debate and it was never demonstrated to us as producers that it would have any benefit," he said.

Take control to halt sheep industry decline

Source: www.farmersguardian.com, July 30 2010

Unless commercial sheep farmers demand easy care traits and genetically-improved rams from pedigree breeders, nothing would change to prevent further decline in the UK sheep industry, warned New Zealand sheep farmer and consultant, Murray Rohloff.

Mr Rohloff, a pioneer of easy care sheep systems and the use of performance recording in New Zealand, said UK producers would have to become more efficient to survive likely cuts in EU support.

"You need to concentrate on rigorous culling and improving genetic selection, rather than constantly moaning about things beyond the farmgate over which you have no control," he said.

When subsidies were withdrawn overnight in 1984, 40 per cent of New Zealand beef and sheep farmers went out of business. Those who survived improved lambing percentage by 22 per cent and the average carcase weight of lambs by 19 per cent.

"Ewe numbers have fallen 40 per cent, but the average crop is down only 25 per cent and we are producing 11 per cent more lamb," said Mr Rohloff. "Most of this improvement can be attributed to genetic selection."

He urged pedigree breeders to start recording under the same management regimes as commercial flocks, otherwise their genetics would be unsuitable for grass-only diets, under which most commercial flocks operated. Easy care systems could cut human intervention and labour costs.