

Points of View

A forum for sharing perspectives from across the Canadian Sheep Industry



CANADIAN SHEEP FEDERATION

DECEMBER 2010

VOLUME 4 • ISSUE 12

Myth: We have the extension services required to help producers make necessary advances in sheep production.

The future of sheep industry extension services was a much-discussed topic at CSF's Annual General Meeting last November in Calgary. Right now our industry is really at the crossroads in terms of serving our domestic market. Do we grow and build the capacity to capture more of our Canadian market, or do we continue to short our domestic demand and risk losing the infrastructure needed to support our industry?

The answer here is obvious and extension services will play a big part in our growth. Extension has always played a key role in helping producers across the country manage their animals, especially from a health and welfare perspective. According to case study interviewee, veterinarian Dr. Mamoon Rashid, Business Development Specialist for Small Ruminants with Manitoba's Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, a high percentage of sheep extension experts tend to be veterinarians.

But as Dr. Mamoon points out, producers need a lot more than animal health expertise from extension. Right now, that information does not exist, says Tony Stoltz, CSF's project co-coordinator for the Radio Frequency Identification Pilot Project.

Quite simply, producers and the industry need expert guidance on how to grow their flocks efficiently and profitably.

Extension will also have to play a more important role in helping producers understand business planning, evaluate existing information, learn new technology and comprehend the impacts of new legislation and increasing government regulations.

If our industry is to grow, extension needs to play a key role in developing tools such as efficient production models for different sheep operations, whether it be a 200-head sheep farm or a 1,000-head operation.

But producers also have a key role to play, and should take advantage of tools and services already available. They must be engaged in understanding their business and growing their operation. A good place to start for many producers would be CSF's cost of production (COP) template that can be found on the web site at:

www.cansheep.ca/cms/en/Resources/CoP/CoP.aspx

Myth continued

The goal of the COP template is to gain a strong understanding of current costs of production for the purpose of building a business model that could be used to recruit new producers. It would also provide benchmarks to help understand the costs and challenges of sheep production.

It serves as a great starting point for producers to evaluate their business and also help focus extension efforts. It will be time well spent.

Send your comments to pointsofview@cansheep.ca, or contact Barbara Caswell directly at 1-888-684-7739 or barbara@cansheep.ca.

Barbara Caswell
Acting Executive Director
Canadian Sheep Federation
(519) 824-6018
1 (888) 684-7739
barbara@cansheep.ca

P.S. Please turn to pages 5-7 to read perspectives on extension from Dr. Mamoon Rashid of Manitoba's Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives.

Letters to the Editor

"Bill Duffield of Codan Suffolks requested clarification on a number of issues regarding approved Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags for the Canadian Sheep Identification Program (CSIP) – the Shearwell Set Tag and the Allflex tag. He also requested further insight from CSF on what it has learned about performance of the approved tags as well as other tags that were tested during phase one of the national pilot project, but have not been approved for use.

As we move forward with the evolution to full traceability of sheep and lambs, the CSF will remain alert to new developments in tag technology and to what is effective, efficient and affordable for Canadian lamb producers. Stay tuned for more insights from the National Lamb Traceability Project final report, which will be available later this year.

Thanks for your questions, Bill. I put them to our Technical Extension Team and they came up with the following insights for you and all producers." -Barbara Caswell

Evaluating the Allflex RFID tag

The Allflex button tag has been the only tag approved for use in Quebec since the Quebec government introduced mandatory RFID of sheep and lambs in 2004. To date, thousands of these tags have been placed in the ears of young lambs and adult sheep in the Quebec program and several thousand were installed during the national pilot project between March and October, 2010.

Extensive testing was conducted before these tags were approved. *Despite rumours that these tags are too large and too heavy to be placed in the ears of young lambs, this has not proven to be the case in the field.* Thousands have been placed in the ears of lambs as young as two to seven days of age. There have been instances where a tag was placed too close to or through the cartilage in the ears of young lambs resulting in a certain degree of droop to the ear. This is an error on the part of the person installing the tag – not the fault of the tag. When placed properly, these tags function normally with good retention rates.

Situations where the tags are lost are usually traced to placement error.

There have been instances of tags that will not read 30 to 50 days after the initial installation. These situations have also been traced to applicator error. Allflex responded to producer requests by manufacturing one applicator that works with all their styles of tags so producers do not have to buy multiple taggers. To install the RFID tags, a small insert must be removed. It needs to be replaced to apply other Allflex tags. Failure to remove the insert causes damage to a certain percentage of the RFID transponders. Unfortunately, there have been instances where the instructions clearly written on the package have not been followed, and this has resulted in some damaged tags with no readability. When properly installed, these tags perform well. These tags also penetrate the ears of all classes of sheep.

Evaluating the Shearwell RFID tag

The Shearwell tag was officially approved as a CSIP tag just prior to the Alberta Lamb Traceability Project, now in its third year. Thousands of these tags have been installed during this time and an additional 10,000 have also been installed during the national pilot project. *Producers have responded enthusiastically to these tags as they are a loop tag and relatively small, have good visibility, and when placed on the leading edge of the ear and close to the head, have high retention rates.* There have been instances where the plastic becomes brittle during extremely cold western weather and there have been reports of the tags breaking where they bend during application, but this does not affect their utility and retention in the ear.

To date, these tags retain their colour and are working well in the field. As with all tags, the Shearwell tag is easier to place in the ears of lambs. There have been few incidences of infection and these have been traced to tag installation in adult ewes when the ears were very wet.

The instructions say to apply to clean, dry ears. In a small percentage of situations where adult ewes or rams have very thick, heavy ears, the application of the Shearwell tag requires slower, steady pressure on the applicator, as opposed to the quick punch method, to prevent the plastic male point of the tag from folding over.

As with most farming tasks, experience is the best teacher. In these circumstances, the head of the animal had to be carefully restrained. When folding has occurred, the slightly damaged tag can still be used in a lamb where it easily penetrates the ear. The Technical Extension Team working with the national project report a few instances where the Shearwell tags could not be applied to adult sheep. However, Shearwell has been looking at some improvements to the tag. As RFID tags will in most cases be applied to lambs in order to gain the management efficiencies, this is a non issue.

How Other RFID Tags Rate

During the national pilot project, two other styles of RFID tags were used in sheep and lambs. These tags have not been approved for use in the CSIP. *The CSF is aware there is a need for a less expensive tag. For the national pilot project, Allflex provided two tag options based on this criteria for field evaluation – the Adamatic and Bubblegum tags.*

Adamatic tags have demonstrated good read ranges. They are not currently tamper evident and would have to be altered before being approved as a CSIP tag. They apply well in lambs and when used in strips with the automatic applicator, install very quickly and are therefore labour efficient when installing during a heavy lambing season. There are concerns that the slender post may break over time – this is not yet known. These tags are difficult to apply in adult sheep.

Bubblegum tags are a very pliable plastic loop tag and quite new on the market. They have demonstrated good read ranges and are very light with visible numbers for producers wishing to visually read and record numbers. They appear to have high retention rates although few tags have yet been in place for more than a year. They seem not to snag on objects possibly due to the softness of the material. Two prototype taggers were supplied with the project tags – one of which worked better than the other. The tags installed well in lambs and immature sheep though extra care and thus time was required to make sure that the tag did not contact the ear of the animal before the tagger was squeezed.

These tags proved difficult to place in the ears of mature animals. Some producers have attempted to modify the tagger with a spring clip and this has worked to a degree.

It appears that either the male post is too pliable or the holder in the tagger does not keep the tag in the exact position long enough during the application process. It seems that any contact with the ear may dislodge the tag slightly causing it to fold over and thus not penetrate the ears of adult sheep. *Producers report that they like the read range of the Bubblegum tags but find them to be frustrating to both remove from the packaging strip and to apply.* Feedback on these concerns has been forwarded to the company as they requested and perhaps modifications will be made.

Extension Perspectives

Dr. Mamoon Rashid

Manitoba's Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives

The concept of extension is not new to Canadian agriculture. It's a service that dates back to the early 1900s when provincial governments opened agricultural extension offices all across the country. The goal was to provide farmers with training, education and new technologies to make improvements on the farm, as well as facilitate communication between producers and government officials.

Today, although some delivery methods have changed, the goal of extension remains the same. Dr. Mamoon Rashid, a Business Development Specialist for Small Ruminants with Manitoba's Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, has been offering extension services to Canadian sheep producers for the past four years. He brings to the position a wide understanding of extension and years of experience working as a Veterinarian in Pakistan – one of the biggest sheep producing nations in the world. Before moving to Canada, Rashid finished his post-graduate in animal science from North Carolina State University, and gathered experiences working with livestock in the same state for a few years.

Recently, the Canadian Sheep Federation sat down with Rashid to discuss extension services and the important role they play in strengthening the Canadian sheep industry.

How are extension services evolving?

I am seeing more and more technology coming into extension. Even in the past four years, the number of producers who communicate with me via e-mail has significantly increased. I even communicate with farmers through text messaging. We're also seeing more private extension services coming on to the scene especially in Ontario and Alberta.

What type of extension services do you like to work with?

There are certain rules for extension services but overall they are very flexible and often times depend on the service provider. I personally like to work with new technology as much as possible and incorporate tools like the Internet, e-mail and webinars into my services. I mix these with more traditional extension services like workshops, seminars, field days, and talking one on one with farmers.

CASE STUDY

What types of extension services are currently available to Manitoba sheep producers?

We offer one on one consulting, individual farm visits, educational workshops and seminars to name a few. We work very closely with the industry organizations and producer groups on developing these services.

We recently completed a series of seminars on sheep production, which were run in conjunction with the district meetings. Topics included general sheep production, new producer information, on farm food safety, business planning and farm economics. There was also a lengthy discussion on the current status of the Manitoba sheep industry – where it is and where it's going.

What types of extension services seem to work best for producers?

If you are trying to address a group, I think a workshop or seminar is the best way to go. You can offer practical information and create a dialogue, which producers really seem to react well to. Producer led meetings have been very successful and so have hands-on training days.

If you are trying to address a group, I think a workshop or seminar is the best way to go. You can offer practical information and create a dialogue, which producers really seem to react well to.

How do you think Manitoba's extension services rate in terms of quality?

I think we do a good job but that's not saying there isn't room for improvement. We have 40 agricultural extension offices open throughout the province, which is much more than many other provinces in Canada. I think our department is strong in terms of flexibility and availability. I have a solid commitment to the farmers, day or night, week day or weekend I make myself readily available.

How is the uptake of extension services in Manitoba?

Manitoba producers have a high up take of extension services, something I credit back to our flexibility and availability. Our services are credible as well. Producers know they are getting accurate information from a reliable source and that means something.

How could Manitoba improve its extension services?

We have such a big province and a demanding industry so sometimes it is difficult to meet everyone's requests. Our department has recently started bringing more people in to meet the need so that will help.

I believe that services can be improved by taking advantage of the latest technology but producers need to be open and willing to do that. I see this happening already so as long as the producers are on board, I am going to go with it.

CASE STUDY

I also think that extension needs to connect more with research. A lot of departments are already doing this but it's not happening enough. Research generates new information on how to do things better. Farmers can take this scientifically valid information and bring it back to the farm improving their production methods.

"... extension needs to connect more with research. A lot of departments are already doing this but it's not happening enough. Research generates new information on how to do things better.

What advice would you give to other provinces that are looking to improve their extension services?

If they aren't already, I would encourage other provinces' government and producer organizations to really focus on extension and make it a priority for their sheep industry.

If you take a look at different extension services you'll notice in many cases they are being led by veterinarians who place a lot of focus on animal health. This is fantastic but I think there is much more to extension than just animal health. For example, managing husbandry practices on the farm should be a very important component to any province's extension department. Extension needs to be diverse.

Your feedback is essential!

This forum will only be successful if everyone weighs in with their own perspectives from their place in the industry. Tell us:

- What you think about "Points of View"
- If you had a strong reaction – either good or bad – to the first feature editorial
- If you want to contribute to an upcoming issue
- If you have a topic you'd like to see addressed
- If you have a story that would make a good case study for others to learn from

What's in it for you? Most people don't often get a chance to have their opinion heard. This is yours. Use it to help make an impact on the future of our business. **Send your comments, suggestions and questions to pointsofview@cansheep.ca or call CSF at 519-824-6018 or 1-888-684-7739.**

In the next issue...

Myth: The fine for not tagging sheep is \$500 per animal.

The truth is as of October 2010, the fine for not tagging animals was increased from \$500 to \$1,300 per animal, and transporters, producers and auction barns can be fined for violation by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.. Livestock auctions have already reported being served the stiffer penalty.

- Do you feel the increased fine is warranted? Will higher fines ensure a higher level of tagging compliance?
- Will increased fines deter transporters from taking sheep? Could it put producers out of business?
- How do we ensure that all sheep are properly tagged as they proceed from farm to market?
- Do you believe there should be allowances for sheep that may lose tags in transport? For example, should a loss rate of one per cent be expected and exempted from the fine?

Please send your comments to pointsofview@cansheep.ca, or contact Barbara Caswell directly at 1-888-684-7739 or barbara@cansheep.ca.