

Points of View

A forum for sharing perspectives from across the Canadian Sheep Industry



CANADIAN SHEEP FEDERATION

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Myth – There is no point in calling a vet because they cost too much.

I've heard this sentiment from sheep farmers more than once. But I've also heard the flip-side – I can't afford not to call my vet.

In addition to the cost argument, all too often I hear producers say they have no access to a veterinarian that is either competent with, or interested in working with sheep.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about the importance of building a solid vet/client relationship. This is partially due to the Extra Label Drug Use (ELDU) policy set out in the Canadian Sheep and Lamb Food Safe Farm Practices (FSFP) Program. The policy states that "ELDU may only be employed when a producer has a prescription from a veterinarian within a vet client-patient relationship (VCPR)."

This is just one reason to have a flock vet. A good veterinarian can also help build a preventative sheep health program to help minimize your risk and maximize your profit.

I asked a few producers to weigh in on this discussion by answering these questions:

- Do you have a vet for your flock? If yes, what value does he/she bring to your operation? If no, why not? How do you care for the health of your flock?

- Do you believe in preventative veterinary care for your flock?
- Is cost a barrier to having preventative veterinary care for your flock?
- Is distance a barrier to having preventative veterinary care for your flock?
- Do you have a vet for your Livestock Guard Dogs?

Our contributors highlighted the various challenges the sheep industry faces when it comes to veterinary care. One issue underscored by nearly all respondents is the lack of veterinary expertise for sheep. Fortunately, a new organization is working to address this problem in Ontario. Dr. Rex Crawford, president of the Small Ruminant Veterinarians of Ontario, talked about his mandate to bring greater focus to veterinary care for sheep and other small ruminants. You'll find excerpts from our conversation with Dr. Crawford on page 5.

Jennifer MacTavish
Executive Director
Canadian Sheep Federation
(519) 824-6018

Myth – There is no point in calling a vet because they cost too much.

Lorna S. Wall

Wall 2 Wall Sheep Ranch, Poplarfield, MB

Do you have a vet? Yes, we have two. There are major drawbacks to most vets though. We have no large animal vets in our immediate area and both our vets are about an hour away and have on-call numbers and will do farm visits for a reasonable rate. We can often reduce costs by having them come on routine days to other operations in the same area. The other positive with both our vets is they have or previously had their own sheep. But in saying that, there are local vets listed on the approved sheep vets list that don't/won't give care to sheep, so how others find a good vet I don't know. We need a better system to have "large animal" or rural vets receive better training on ruminants and have more information and drug studies for species specific trials for ruminants. This way we would have to use less off-label drugs for our sheep.

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The other issue for us is the Livestock Guard Dogs (LGDs) and Border Collies. All need proper vaccinations, rabies shots and wormers. These need to come from the vet not the grocery store! A vet can ensure that your flock is safe and healthy on two levels –internal/parasital/health-wise and protected by healthy dogs.

Barbara Johstone Grimmer

I grew up on a small purebred sheep farm in a community with a good selection of veterinarians. In the early years, my parents brought in different veterinarians for different situations – and we saw a variety of expertise with sheep. We concluded that with this expensive tuition we had indeed learned how to manage most problems ourselves. We also learned which veterinarian was most suited to sheep and formed a good relationship with that practice – just in case.

Now I live in a more isolated community with a larger, less intensively raised flock. Through the years we have had different veterinarians who practice in our small community. Most have had little sheep or large animal experience. Once, in an extreme case where I had no help, a lamb was too big to deliver and I thought at the very least I would learn how to save at least the ewe or the lamb. Unfortunately, both the ewe and lamb died after a delivery that I could have done, but chose not to because I anticipated such an outcome. On top of that, I was faced with an expensive vet bill and I didn't learn anything new. With the price of sheep, it is hard to justify any input cost that can be avoided. It is vital to know how to take care of your flock and learn many veterinary techniques to keep costs down. It also reduces stress on the producer because more immediate care can be taken.

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There are knowledgeable sheep vets that are an email or phone call away that I am comfortable with for particular problems or questions. Most of the time we are on our own, with good books, the internet and other sheep people willing to lend their expertise. Our flock is as closed as possible, and I cull or segregate those with health concerns. They are outdoors all year and this contributes to a healthy flock with little intervention.

We also use a mail order sheep supply company that is very useful. The meds are reasonably priced and the vendor is very knowledgeable.

I have not brought in a veterinarian for preventative flock health. Whereas cost and distance are barriers to having preventative veterinary care, the main obstacle that holds me back is that a veterinarian may suggest a change to my management that I don't agree with, and this might put me in a vulnerable position as being seen as "non-compliant". Is the expectation of a preventative flock health assessment by a veterinarian to be a plan that is followed by the producer, or a dialogue intended to provide options for the producer? I would like to know more about the benefits to such a program from someone who has this in their farm management plan.

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Roma Tingle

Glenbirnam Farm, Prince George, BC

" If local veterinarians were more familiar with sheep it might encourage people to use them, but as long as the costs outweigh the benefits, I doubt people will use them to great extent."

To answer some of your questions:

1. We do have a veterinarian, but probably I would have to say they are of limited value for the sheep. We do most of the basic work ourselves.
2. Preventative vet care – I do believe in it to some extent – but other than to find out if there are any local issues we should be aware of, we would not use a veterinarian for much, if any, physical work for the sheep.
3. Cost is definitely an issue – most veterinarians charge fees to make farm calls, as well as mileage which can easily add up to more than the value of the animal.
4. For us, distance is not an issue – although there is a minimum mileage charge to attend on the farm.
5. We do not have specific guardian dogs, but our dogs are taken for vaccinations, worming and general check-ups.

The biggest issue for producers in our area is the lack of "large" animal veterinarians and the lack of expertise for specific types of livestock. There would be much more emphasis and expertise for cattle and horses than sheep, swine, goats, etc.

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We have only one clinic that will deal with livestock, and they prefer to have the animal brought in – something that is almost impossible for many smaller producers because they don't have the ability to transport them, and with our winter conditions, prohibitive even if you do have the means to take them in for treatment.

It is not necessarily true that a vet is necessary to build a flock health program. Many of the issues that come up for sheep are brought forward by our sheep producers associations and interacting with other shepherds. If local veterinarians were more familiar with sheep it might encourage people to use them, but as long as the costs outweigh the benefits, I doubt people will use them to great extent.

Personally, I use our veterinarian for advice and issues I do not feel competent with, and think that we probably use the professionals more than most. I can appreciate that the veterinarians do much better with their dog and cat business, and fewer are studying large animals, so there is much less chance of finding veterinarians who are familiar with sheep, and want to invest time and money in their care.

Chris Kennedy

Sooner or later everyone who keeps livestock will need a vet. Given the new Humane Society Act and the increased powers and activity of the Humane Society it would be unwise not to use a vet. We use a large animal vet for the sheep and a small animal vet for the working dogs. We have a valid vet/client relationship with both.

We use the sheep vet for consultations on planning a preventative healthcare program, for health issues that arise, for diagnosis and post-mortems, and for supplying drugs. I always take the sheep to the vet, rather than bring the vet to the farm, because of cost. If there is a flock health problem I will take one or two sheep to the vet for diagnosis, but a single sheep that is sick I will treat myself or euthanize. I buy all my vaccines from the vet, to ensure that they are kept refrigerated through the supply chain. The vet can also supply products, such as wormers and antibiotics that are not available from feed stores. For a commercial producer, cost/benefit has always to be kept in mind. A small hobby producer may have a very different perspective from mine on treating a sick sheep, but that is a personal decision.

Preventative health care is vital to a sheep flock (and should be for people, too). Ours is worked out in consultation with our vet. Good nutrition, an efficient handling system, vaccinations, a worming program and culling criteria are the basics for a healthy flock and cannot be neglected. Health problems requiring a vet's care should be very rare in a well-managed flock. You cannot afford not to use preventative health care.

Theoretically, the same cost/benefit analysis should apply to the guard dogs and Border Collies, but sentiment has a way of creeping in when a good dog is sick or, in particular, injured. Our dog vet is well aware that our dogs are working dogs, and, unlike some pets, the budget is not unlimited. An older guard dog at the end of its working life will not receive the geriatric vet care that a pet might, but will be euthanized when its quality of life starts to go down. The working dogs do receive their recommended wormings and vaccinations.

Dr. Rex Crawford: Small Ruminant Veterinarians of Ontario

A close relationship with a knowledgeable veterinarian is an important part of maintaining a healthy and productive flock. In fact, according to Dr. Rex Crawford, a large animal vet based in Orangeville, Ontario, producers who don't work one-on-one with a vet are losing out on a wealth of information, another viewpoint on production issues and access to vaccines, pharmaceuticals and feed additives. For the past four years, Crawford has owned and operated Dufferin Veterinary Services, a large animal clinic that works with cattle, horses, sheep, goats and alpacas. Specifically referring to sheep, his clientele consists of 25 producers and a large group of hobbyists. In his practice, Crawford places a strong emphasis on developing relationships with producers. "Just calling the vet clinic occasionally for advice or to pick up drugs is not enough," he says.

Vet-client relationship takes time, but pays off

"Producers should understand that veterinarians need to visit a flock, expand their knowledge of the disease and production challenges on that particular farm, and understand management abilities in order to do a good job."

In Crawford's opinion, producers need to work with their veterinarian on regular flock health visits, management protocols, outbreak challenges and individual sick animals. And relationships need to be developed over time; it's not something that happens overnight. "Producers should understand that veterinarians need to visit a flock, expand their knowledge of the disease and production challenges on that particular farm, and understand management abilities in order to do a good job," says Crawford.

When choosing a vet, Crawford says the most important thing to look for is a willingness to work with and for the producer. "Not all vets are well educated in flock health matters, but they all have access to the resources necessary to provide excellent service if they're interested in learning," he says. For producers currently looking for a veterinarian, Crawford recommends starting with the local clinic that provides service to cattle. "Asking local sheep producers who they work with and how well serviced they feel is also a good way to judge whether a clinic is right for you," says Crawford.

New vet organization to benefit sheep in Ontario

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But in many areas throughout Canada, it is difficult to find a veterinarian who is willing to work with sheep. Crawford hopes that the launch of a new organization – the Small Ruminant Veterinarians of Ontario (SRVO) – will aid to that situation at least in Ontario.

The SRVO, which began in November 2008, was created by a group of vets interested in small ruminant medicine. The University of Guelph and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs have gotten involved and are supporting the initiative. Crawford himself is president of the organization. The objectives of the SRVO are three-fold: to act as a voice for veterinarians within the small ruminant industry; to provide continuing educational opportunities for Ontario veterinarians; and to promote small ruminant medicine as a career path for students and already-practicing vets.

Sheep producers will benefit from the SRVO as there will be more well-educated veterinarians willing to work with their flocks. The SRVO also hopes to benefit producers by acting to increase the number of labelled drugs for the sheep industry. To do this, the organization plans on working closely with government, pharmaceutical companies and the industry groups like the Canadian Sheep Federation. For more information on the SRVO, Crawford says producers should speak with their local veterinarian.

Your feedback is essential!

The dialogue has started, but we need to hear more about what you think in order to keep this forum going. Its success depends how much everyone in the sheep industry weighs in with their own perspectives and suggestions for change.

Tell us:

- What you think about “Points of View”
- If you had a strong reaction – either good or bad – to the contributions or letters in this issue
- If you want to contribute to an upcoming issue
- If you have a story that would make a good case study for others to learn from
- If you have a topic you’d like to see addressed

Few people get the opportunity to have their opinions heard. This is yours. Send your comments, suggestions and questions to pointsofview@cansheep.ca or contact Jennifer MacTavish directly by phone at 1-888-684-7739 or by email at jennifer@cansheep.ca.

In the next issue...

Myth – Canada is on track with its trading partners to eradicate scrapie.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Canada is lagging behind its current and potential trading partners such as the US and the European Union. The US plans to be “scrapie free” by 2017. North of the border, we are nowhere near achieving “scrapie free” status. At this point we don’t even know the prevalence of scrapie in Canada. Eradication will take effort and funding from everyone – government, industry associations and producers.

As we move towards scrapie eradication, it’s clear that we need to tighten our import protocols. One of the ways to do this is by establishing conditions that are identical to the policies laid out by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). Our current and potential trading partners are doing this and Canada must follow suit to maintain or re-open markets. This is why the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) recently announced that requirements around the importation of female sheep and goats into Canada from the US will change this fall.

Don’t be fooled, we will reach a time when only flocks and herds that are fully certified (on the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program) will be able to export to other countries. The CSF works with Scrapie Canada to deliver the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program. CFIA is also conducting limited surveillance of the disease.

- Do you feel you know enough about Scrapie Canada’s eradication programs?
- Are you/were you enrolled in any of the programs? If not, why not? What are the barriers? If yes, why? What are the pros and cons?
- Do you believe CSF is doing all it can to eradicate scrapie? What about the CFIA?

Send your comments to pointsofview@cansheep.ca, or contact Jennifer MacTavish directly at 1-888-684-7739 or jennifer@cansheep.ca.