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Keys for Small Ruminant Producers Purchasing and Raising Goats and Sheep

Uford A. Madden

Assistant Professor and Extension Food Safety Specialist
Extension and Outreach Program
College of Engineering Sciences, Technology and Agriculture
Florida A&M University
Tallahassee, Florida
uford.madden@famuedu

Abstract: This article provides key information that Extension professionals can use to prepare potential producers and current producers raising goats and sheep, and those who are expanding their enterprises. Extension professionals can help small ruminant producers to be more aware of the fact that the quality of the animals they begin with or acquire will affect their ability to impact production and marketing of animal-derived foods and products. Working with Extension professionals, these producers can make important early decisions that will have long-term effects on their ability to develop, maintain, and expand their enterprises while producing high-quality products demanded by consumers.

Introduction

Extension professionals should be able to help prepare potential producers, producers who are presently raising goats and sheep, those who are thinking of expanding their enterprises to enhance their ability to meet consumers' demand for high-quality products. Extension professionals can provide producers with information on transactions involving goat and sheep, which are similar to those at cattle sales. The price of a goat or sheep is usually whatever two parties agree to (Pinkerton, 1999).

This article examines the role of Extension professionals in providing information that should help producers to be clear as to why they are looking forward for raising goats and/or sheep. Also, there is important specific information that Extension professionals should have to support these producers in addressing various issues.

Why Are Producers Buying Animals?

Extension professionals can gather information by using focused questions to get an idea of how prepared small ruminant producers are. Are they intending to raise goats or sheep only for hobby, or do they want goats and sheep for recreational purposes, or do they have a need for goats and/or sheep to keep their children off the street, or do they want to provide their underemployed spouse with another meaningful relationship? Are they profit-seekers and prospective players in the nation's next big marketing success? Whatever the reasons, producers should make sure they are comfortable with their decisions, and they should not be afraid to change their minds (Pinkerton, 1999).

When Should Producers Buy Animals?

The most important consideration is, are these producers prepared to perform this type of work? Extension professionals can play an important role in helping producers to be more aware of the involvement that is required in taking care of the animals.

Are their pens, chutes, and fences goat and sheep proof? Are predator controllers in place? Is grazing adequate, and, if not, do they have supplemental feed on hand to feed the animals? Are they willing to learn (at their expense, of course) about goats and sheep in order to take care of them? Do they have dewormers, pinkeye, and other medicines or veterinarians who have some minimum goat and sheep competency to provide animal health care? Have they alerted their neighbors to the arrival of goats and sheep at their boundaries to reduce fears of transmissible diseases, fence-crawling, overgrazing, water pollution, excessive noise, exotic odors, and overt sex? After addressing those issues, they are ready; if those issues are not addressed, they may find that life will be less than it could be or not the same as they are used to (Pinkerton, 1999).

Who Should Producers Buy Animals From?

This is a question that is even more difficult than any other that small ruminant producers have to deal with, because they should know that they start with some good quality animals. What is a fair price for the animals? Goats and sheep may be purchased from public (occasionally private) auctions, or from traders and brokers (order buyers), or from ranchers and farmers (Pinkerton, 1999). Extension professionals should be able to provide producers with relevant useful information that can assist them in making some of these important early decisions (e.g., Holcomb, R., & Muske, G., 2000; Barnes, J., Meche, J. C., Hatch, D. A. & Dixon, G., 2009).

Buying animals directly from goat and sheep owners has proven to be the least painful for most purchasers because they get a chance to visit the farms and see the animals before they buy them. Livestock owners know from first-hand, sometimes evil experiences, that auctions are places to sell, to get rid of animals, and not a place to buy animals that they want to keep. The probability of getting decent-quality, healthy animals at auctions is not great and may be similar with many traders (Pinkerton, 1999).

Goats and sheep should be fed mostly grass, hay, and browse plants. Producers should find out what the animals have been eating or fed before buying them. Proper feeding and management of animals will result in animals with high-quality meat and less fat. Goats and sheep should not be fed excess grains, commercial feeds, and food scraps like bread (Madden, 2009).

Why Should Producers Observe Animals Before Buying Them?

Observing the animals is most important in order to make sure that producers can recognize abnormality if any is present. Extension professionals working with these producers should have the experience to help them on how to observe the animals' behavior, walking, feeding, temperament, and appearance. Also, observing the hair coat, eyes, nose, feet, stomach, genitals, hooves, horns, tail, head, and back is important. For females, producers should observe the udder and number of teats present, because the animals have to produce milk for the kids.

Lameness is a common problem in goats and sheep that may result from excess moisture from rain that caused flooding of areas, including the sheds where fecal matter is present. Animals that are unable to walk around the pastures and feed normally will experience weight loss, because goats and sheep love to browse

and graze the pastures and will not get enough to eat (Madden, 2009).

Conclusion

The ability of Extension professionals to work with small ruminant producers to make good early decisions about foundation stock for raising goats and sheep will have long-term positive effects that will allow them to reap the benefits of their enterprises. They should help small ruminant producers be aware of the fact that the quality of the animals that they begin with or acquire as they develop, maintain, and expand their enterprises will have the greatest impact on their ability to meet consumers' demand for high-quality, animal-derived foods and products.

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