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Dairy

Dairy sheep farmers use genetic evaluation tool to improve production and profits

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

Across the U.S. and Canada, innovative sheep farmers are turning to a genetic evaluation tool, GenOvis, to make more educated breeding, selection and culling decisions.

Farmers who use the tool say they have been able to improve flock genetics, production and profits.

Milk traits have good heritability, so sheep farmers for generations have tracked animals through body scoring, measuring milk volume and mapping family lines to select the rams and ewes most likely to pass on good milk traits. This can be tedious, and it can also be difficult to distinguish between visible characteristics, management impacts and under-



Courtesy of Rebecca King

Rebecca King with her sheep.

lying genes.

“When you look at your animals, you can see physical traits and production, but you can’t see exactly what their genes are,” said Rebecca King, owner of Monkey-flower Ranch and Garden Variety Cheese in Royal Oaks, Calif., milking about 90 sheep annually.

King was speaking at the Dairy Sheep Association of North America’s annual symposium.

Now, using GenOvis, King said it’s faster and easier breed for better milk traits.

GenOvis is an on-farm sheep genetic evaluation program run by a Canadian company.

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Bee Tolman, president of the Dairy Sheep Association of North America, said DSANA will hold information sessions about GenOvis for interested producers in February and March.

Contact DSANA to learn more: hello@dsana.org

So far, most of the breeds in GenOvis’s database are East Friesian, Lacaune and crosses. Over time, DSANA’s leaders say they hope to see more sheep and breeds added to the database for a fuller national dataset.

It works like this: A dairy pays to be part of the program, about \$300 per season.

Throughout the year, the farm collects samples and data on its flock’s production: yield, milk components, pedigrees, lambing data and other records.

Three to five times a year, the farm sends samples to the Rocky Moun-

tain Dairy Herd Improvement Association in Utah, which analyzes milk components and somatic cell counts.

From there, the data is handled by Quebec-based GenOvis, which generates an “estimated breeding value” for each animal.

The producer can then use this dataset to guide breeding decisions.

Advice for sheep dairies on getting started with a distributor

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

Sheep dairy processors say moving from direct-to-customer marketing to working with a distributor can be challenging, but if done right it can open new opportunities.

In a panel discussion during the recent Dairy Sheep Association of North America’s symposium, two longtime processors and a pair of cheese distributors shared advice with dairy farmers who make sheep cheese and yogurt on how to get started in distribution.

Liam Callahan, co-founder, cheesemaker and CEO of Bellwether Farms in Sonoma, Calif. — one of the nation’s two largest sheep dairy processors — said he thinks a great way to start in distribution is by first building a direct-to-consumer following, then getting to know local chefs.

Bellwether Farms started in this way in 1990, selling cheese at



Counter Cheese Caves
Nora Granger, left, with husband Eric Casella, co-owners of Counter Cheese Caves, a boutique cheese distribution company.

farmers markets and then expanding to work with specialty chefs.

Callahan said it soon became impractical to haul product around in a van or SUV.

“We just needed people with

more trucks than we had,” he said. He sought a distributor.

It helped that Bellwether Farms already had chefs asking for his product.

“One thing you’re going to learn pretty quickly with distributors is if they don’t have a customer who’s asking for you, they’re not likely to bring your product in,” said Callahan. “If you have a chef on your side, it really greases your wheels. I can’t emphasize that enough.”

Breaking into retail, Callahan said, is more challenging.

Callahan said it’s crucial for producers to understand retail pricing. Most distributors have a 20% to 25% margin. If a farm sells a product to a distributor for \$1, the distributor may sell it at \$1.25. The retailer is likely to double that, selling the product for \$2.25 or \$2.50.

Husband and wife Eric Casella and Nora Granger, co-owners of Counter Cheese Caves, a South Carolina-based cheese distribution

company, also offered producers advice.

Casella said he is most likely to take on a new cheesemaker who ships him samples that are packaged in a professional, attractive and food-safe manner.

Granger, his wife, said farmer-cheesemakers should prepare a simple, memorable elevator pitch for their product that distributors can use when talking to retailers.

“As much of that simple, stay-in-your-brain knowledge as you can convey is great,” she said.

Allyson Brennan, national sales and marketing manager for Old Chatham Creamery in New York — another of the largest sheep dairy processors in the U.S. — said processors should also build in promotional and advertising expenses.

“If you don’t build that into your final pricing, it’s going to come back to bite you,” said Brennan.

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Milk price forecast highest in eight years

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

Tight milk supplies and robust demand are expected to pay off for dairy farmers this year with an all-milk price of about \$23 per hundredweight — the highest in eight years, according to the top economist at the National Milk Producers Federation.

The biggest factor is a sharp drop-off in milk production growth and cow numbers, said Peter Vitaliano, the NMPF’s chief economist.

In May, U.S. milk production was about 4.5% higher year over year. Now production is lower than last year, he said during the latest “Dairy Defined” podcast.

The drop-off follows several years when, despite low prices and margins, milk production kept bouncing up. Low prices would knock it down for a few months, but then it would increase back up to 3% year over year growth on a fairly regular basis, he said.

“What’s noteworthy about this latest contraction is that it seems like that upward buoyancy that we’ve seen for several years in the face of not very great returns to milk production is kind of turned around,” he said.

It’s as if after several years of fighting low prices, there was kind of a tipping point occurring. How long it will last is anybody’s guess, but it’s fueling a strong price outlook, he said.

The price outlook for individual dairy products is also the best in eight years. The butter price outlook is the highest it’s ever been in a calendar year.

The price outlook for cheese is the second highest and the whey outlook is the highest in eight years, he said.

“The futures are indicating currently that this supply tightness will continue. Now, the big question is with milk prices this good and feed prices not going up as fast as they were last year, how long is that tightness going to continue and how soon will it be before we see some expansion of milk production again?” he said.

On the demand side, U.S. consumers have a robust appetite for milk and dairy products. International demand has been very strong, and Europe, New Zealand and Australia have not been able to produce enough to continue to fulfill demand from China and other buyers, he said.

“And the United States is benefiting from that,” he said.

The U.S. is on track to export the largest volume by quite a bit compared to any previous year. The entire world market right now has more demand than it has supply, and the U.S. probably has more exportable supplies than the other major exporters, he said.

“I wouldn’t say the industry is immune to a major demand contraction, but consumers domestically and internationally have a ready appetite for dairy that the industry can pretty much count on being there...,” he said.

But in the last several years, producers have had a tendency to overproduce the market, particularly the domestic market, he said.

“If supply and demand can be kept in balance in the domestic market, dairy farmers can look forward to a good year this year,” he said.

That’s because the milk price outlook is stronger than the feed price outlook at the moment, he said.