

Management Challenges for Dairy Goat Sustainability

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Title: Management Challenges for Dairy Goat Sustainability

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The University of California Davis goat herd.
-- Photo by Mike Poe

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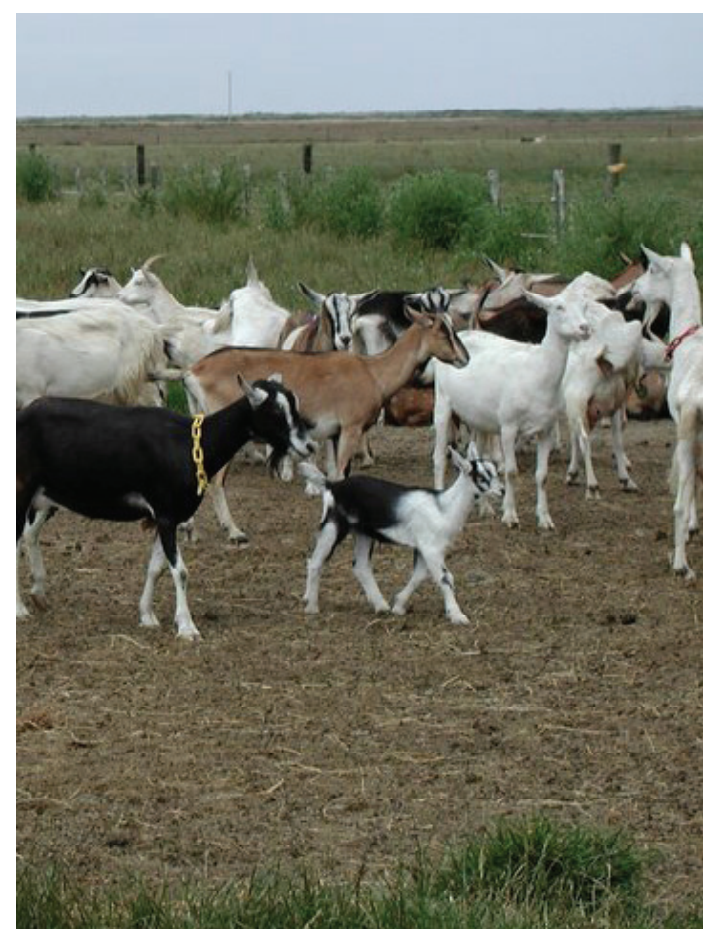
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SARE Grant: \$15,360

Situation

Humboldt County, 650 miles north of San Francisco, has five commercial producers milking around 1,800 goats, all members of the Humboldt/Del Norte Goat Milk Producers Association. A cheese processor, Cypress Grove Chevre, ships cheese nationally and is growing 33% a year. Local milk production is failing to keep pace with demand for processing, so milk is being imported.

This SARE grant was designed to help existing and potential dairy goat producers address herd health issues, improve production and profitability, preserve their family farms, make self-employment in rural areas sustainable, and facilitate networking and working together.



Objectives

- Determine the types of organisms causing foot rot problems in commercial herds and demonstrate effective preventative treatment
- Launch a doe sampling program that will help producers cull animals that fail to meet production standards and improve profits
- Educate producers on these and other challenges through a conference in May 2008 with university and professional speakers.

Actions

Foot Rot

Dr. Steven Berry, DMV, UCCE Dairy Management and Health Specialist, visited Humboldt County twice and conducted swab tests, sending samples to a Texas A&M lab. No infectious organisms were found. Foot inspections showed that lameness resulted from hoof problems that, for the most part, can be prevented with timely trimming and clean, dry conditions. A workshop on foot care was conducted at a goat dairy.

Improved Profitability

A dozen milk meters were purchased and their use demonstrated for collecting data that can help producers cull low-producing does. Hanging the meters in different milk barns proved to be a logistical and cost challenge that needs attention. Each barn had to determine the best way to utilize the meters. Other meters were purchased with a local grant to bring the number to 24. Each producer planned a schedule that met individual needs. Few are on typical DHIA protocol but use the data for management.

Educational Conference

The California Goat Milk Producers Conference was held in Merced on May 15, 2008, with 11 speakers addressing producers from 19 farms. Three veterinarians and UC Davis Extension specialists and advisors spoke and assisted with the conference. A pre-conference survey was created and sent to producers statewide to determine relevant topics, and a post-conference evaluation was used.



Gauging production using milk meters allowed one producer to adjust feed regimens.

Results

Foot Rot

Hoof trimming workshops showed producers techniques, timing, and labor requirements for maintaining healthy hooves. For example, dry does that rarely enter the barn, where trimming is easier, need to be trimmed regularly and cannot be overlooked. After the workshop, one producer hired a worker a half a day a month just to trim hooves. A pneumatic trimmer and table were purchased by the largest producer to ease the task. The fear of infectious disease was eased.

Improved Profitability

Collecting milk production records using the milk meters enabled one producer to sort goats into three milking and feeding strings, which allows for fine-tuning feed to fit the age and production of the goats, saving costs and benefiting the animals.

The milk production data also allowed the producer to cull with sound reasoning 100 goats from the 800-goat herd. Another producer developed a different program for testing to meet that farm's need. The group continues the use of the shared meters.

Conference and Newsletter

Conference DVDs were produced and sent to a dozen producers requesting them from across the West. A Western Region newsletter was created and mailed to a statewide list and extension dairy advisors in other states with a request to pass the newsletter along to goat milk producers. Contacts from the Internet listing of the conference resulted in a Mexican dairy scientist developing ways to share information and a possible exchange with Mexican agricultural students.



Around 1,800 goats are being milked in Humboldt County.

Potential Benefits/Conclusions

A post-conference evaluation sent to all attending will help guide future educational efforts. New and experienced producers have differing educational needs, and starting a new goat dairy is a huge challenge.

Commercial goat milk producers would benefit from a statewide association, but none has been started. A combined meat and dairy goat association has been suggested, but it has pros and cons.

More research and extension educational programs are needed, but experience shows the challenge of bringing producers together. Farm size, with few or no employees to take over milking, makes it difficult for producers to leave the farm. Long distances in California and the West make travel costly.

Costs for labor, fuel, and feed on ranches are making profitability difficult. Many producers have turned to NRCS and FSA as well as Cooperative Extension for assistance to manage manure, improve barns, control runoff, etc.



Producers used creative approaches to hang the milk meters.



Meters help producers gather production data.

