

## Ross Mosteller

District Extension Agent  
Livestock & Natural Resources

### Small Ruminant Basics

Having just returned from our Extension Agent Livestock Program Focus Team meeting in the Winfield/Arkansas City area, there are many news column topics rolling around in my head. The Creekstone beef processing facility, Southern Kansas Cotton Growers gin and the bonus small ruminant tours were all excellent, but it is the latter that I focus on today.

On every sheep/goat tour I've ever been on, one common theme prevails. That is that there is NOT a plethora of local resources, research, help and support in this livestock area - specific to Kansas. That said, there are some VERY good producers who have learned much through trial and error. Finding these folks and quizzing them is a great place to start. Here are some major themes to consider before starting with a small ruminant operation.

*"Start small, get familiar with the animal/production system and be prepared to ask lots of questions!"* Sheep and Goats are NOT just "little cows" and are not the same as each other. Generally speaking, they require more management. Not all goats and sheep are created equally comparing dairy to meat breeds and wool to hair breeds, etc.. but there are some generalities. Goats tend to be browsers, who prefer to eat brushy or woody plants. Sheep tend to prefer forbs (broad-leafed plants) but will browse and eat grass. While cattle tend to be mainly grass-eaters.

*"Be watchful for some common health/disease issues and be prepared to not have as many vaccines and or labeled treatment options at your fingertips."* Internal Parasites (worms), Over-eating disease, CL (Caseous Lymphadenitis) and Chlamydia seem to be major obstacles for small ruminants and their managers. Waiting until you see a problem is often way to late, so these are issues to familiarize yourself with. Finding a veterinarian who is knowledgeable with small ruminants is critical for these and other animal health issues.

*"Start with quality seedstock, from reputable breeders, to have the best chance of success."* The idea of buying a few bred nannies or ewes from a local livestock market, might seem like a good source (*and to be fair can be at times*) but if the animals are of unknown origin, health status and genetic history, you might be asking for trouble. Give yourself the best possible start, even if it means more start-up dollars and research on genetic sources.

*"Quality fencing and facilities are a must."* Goats tend to be more problematic at respecting fences and staying in, but there are good examples of systems that work - all the way from mesh woven wire to simple electrified fences. Bored animals, often times without enough to eat, will lead to issues with not staying in. Couple curiosity and/or boredom with smaller heads, some with horns, and you end up with recipe for having animals getting caught, hanging themselves and higher death rates around fences and feeding equipment.

*"Predators can be a major problem!"* A common predator coming to mind would be coyotes, however, there are others ranging from farm dogs to eagles. Especially in range grazing settings, guardian animals and predator control are needed considerations. Just like the small ruminants themselves, not all guardian animals are not created equally, but most often you see dogs, donkeys and llamas utilized.

This is by no means a complete or comprehensive list of topics to consider, but are some recurring themes shared by many breeders in many places. Jumping into a new animal species venture requires much thought and planning. One good basic resource for the beginner is the Penn State publication "[So You Want to Raise Sheep or Goats?](#)" Your local Extension office should be a great resource for you as well.