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Adding Small Ruminants to a Cowherd

There seems to be a longstanding feud between shepherds and cowboys, especially when it comes to sharing range between large and small ruminant animals. Maybe there was logic in those feuds, but there seems to me to be science to say that with proper management ruminants can co-exist to mutual benefit. Please read on, but if you'd like to learn more on this topic, I'd encourage participation in the Northeast Kansas Sheep & Goat school in Effingham on March 5, with K-State's Dr. Kelsey Bentley.

Beef producers may need to consider several items before adding small ruminants to their operation. Producers adding small ruminants have found that the old recommendation of adding a ewe or doe per cow without adjusting their stocking rate, while improving their pasture utilization by 10-20% is achievable. This can bring more profit potential to the operation. Following are a few considerations when adding sheep or goats to a beef operation.

Forage utilization is improved when you graze multiple species. Different species have different grazing preferences allowing better utilization of not only the grasses, but forbs as well. Sheep tend to like broadleaf plants and goats are known to browse woody plant material. This lends itself to weed and brush control. Limited grazing resources are better utilized with increased stocking density in a multi-species grazing environment.

Generally speaking, parasites of cattle cannot survive in sheep or goats nor can parasites from sheep or goats survive in cattle. With the parasite life cycle broken, producers have an additional tool to manage parasites. In many cases, grazing multiple species together can reduce parasite loads in the soil with proper management. Small ruminant parasite management is critical to implementation success in any operation. This is another topic that Dr. Bentley will discuss and is very knowledgeable about.

There are some management considerations that should be thought through before purchasing sheep and/or goats. Small ruminants have similarities to cattle regarding grazing and feeding forages. Small ruminants are notably more susceptible to mineral deficiencies and toxicity issues, notably copper for sheep. Greater care during lambing is needed for newborn lambs as they are more susceptible to the environment. Sheep and goats are not just small cattle, so their nutrition, care and management practices need to be considered and prepared for.

Predators can be an issue which often leads to the incorporation of guardian animals. Fencing can be a consideration as well, as fences that hold cattle in may not be sufficient for sheep or goats. Another thing beef cattle rarely deal with is trimming hooves, but sheep and goats may require hoof trimming to prevent lameness. Starting with healthy stock and maintaining a good vaccine and treatment protocol is important to work out with your veterinarian. Products that are labeled for the treatment of infections in small ruminants are limited.

If the determination is made to add sheep and/or goats, the question then becomes what is the best breed to raise? The short answer is those that fit the goals and system, matches resources, and is profitable. Common wool of lower quality is becoming less valuable all the time, so if wool is a focus, fine wool breeds need to be considered. If meat production is the goal and producers do not want to shear, then hair sheep breeds may be the better choice, something goats already have an advantage in. Just like cattle, crossbreeding will improve hybrid vigor and help to sell more pounds of lamb and goat.

For more information on small ruminant management, the K-State Animal Sciences Sheep and Goat website is a great resource: <https://www.asi.k-state.edu/extension/sheep-and-goats/> If you're interested in joining us at the NE KS Sheep and Goat School, reach out to any Extension office in the Northeast corner of Kansas. Hope to see you March 5!