

May 4, 2012

Dear Editor,

The Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency, Ontario Goat, along with the Canadian Sheep Federation, Canadian Sheep Breeders Association and the Canadian Livestock Genetics Association, would like to express their collective concern over the 41 missing Shropshire sheep.

On April 2, 2012, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency notified the public of a breach of quarantine in relation to scrapie control measures taking place in Trent Hills, Ontario. 31 sheep belonging to Montana Jones were slated to be destroyed and tested for scrapie as part of an ongoing scrapie investigation by the CFIA.

Industry members and producers alike can sympathize with the devastating and emotionally charged events that surround a scrapie investigation. A positive case of scrapie is a devastating event for any and all producers involved regardless of the nature of their operation and leads to both economic hardship and the destruction of carefully crafted breeding programs.

Scrapie eradication efforts are, however, essential to the continued growth and vibrancy of the small ruminant industry in Canada. Positive cases of scrapie continue to pose a considerable threat to the health of the national sheep flock and goat herd. Scrapie is a devastating neurodegenerative disease with a long incubation period, for which there is no 100 per cent effective live test. Infected animals can live and spread the disease in flocks and herds without being detected or exhibiting signs of illness.

Any situation where a positive case of scrapie is identified certainly speaks volumes to the need for moving towards scrapie eradication in our country, so these devastating situations cease to exist. Current scrapie control measures have made great strides in reducing the occurrence of the disease in Canada and contravening those measures jeopardizes the efforts made to better our national disease status.

Not only is scrapie eradication important to the industry, the international perception of pro-action in disease control is essential. Recognition of domestic efforts to minimize the risk of disease can help build a robust trade based industry on both domestic and international levels where international trade is essential to the vibrancy and long-term sustainability of the Canadian livestock species. Canada's ability to control the spread of scrapie dictates our ability to trade and interfering with that process jeopardizes the strides made towards domestic and international confidence in our animal health programs.

The events this week impact all livestock sectors because they undermine Canada's ability to demonstrate that we have robust and effective disease control programs in this country.

Actions taken by the group calling itself the “Farmer’s Peace Corps” seriously risk the health and success of the Canadian sheep and goat industries. Moving potentially diseased animals during their greatest period of infectivity risks spreading the disease to an even larger number of animals. The most common pathway for the spread of scrapie is through contact with birthing fluids, and the animals removed from Ms Jones’ farm are apparently due to give birth in the next few weeks. There is concern that this group may be ill-equipped to deal with biosecurity issues that surround this disease. Additionally, any premise or animals associated with this breach of quarantine risk falling under the same control measures applied to the original animals that were taken. What was initially a destruction order for 41 animals could quickly turn into the required destruction of hundreds of potentially infected sheep and goats.

Producers and industry groups alike would urge those involved to re-think the actions they have taken and the impact those actions have had on the small ruminant industry. As devastating as the loss of these 41 animals will be to the producer, it does not justify the impact this recent series of events has had on the survivability of the industry. Moreover, this action makes a mockery of the sacrifices that other producers have made over the years in the shared commitment to rid Canada of this disease scrapie.

Sincerely,

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