Sheep, Goat Field Day Includes First Look At Sheep Breed Study

By Alycia Zuehlke

SAN ANGELO — The 33rd annual Sheep and Goat Field Day earlier this month at the Texas A&M University Agricultural Research and Extension Center here included educational seminars dealing with everything from industry updates to research studies on parasite control, animal nutrition and breed production.

Dr. Dan Waldron, Experiment Station animal science professor, reported preliminary results from an ongoing comparison of breed production differences between Dorper and Rambouillet ewes.

The Rambouillet is often considered by sheep producers to be the breed most suited to the southwestern U.S. rangeland habitat, but in recent years it has begun to face heavy competition from the South African-bred Dorper, introduced to the United States in the mid-1990s.

The Dorper breed was developed, Waldron explained, from hardy black-headed Persians and the Dorset Horn. The resulting sheep carry improved carcass characteristics relative to their Persian kin. Because Dorpers are a hair sheep breed and do not require shearing, they have captured some southwestern producers' attentions over the wooled Rambouillet.

Waldron's study focused not on deciding "which breed was better," he said, but rather which breed was more compatible with specific producers' needs. The project design used 100 Dorper ewes from 20 different flocks in 10 states and 100 Rambouillet ewes from 13 Texas flocks so the research flock would be representative of the breeds rather than any specific bloodline.

The qualities evaluated in the study were lamb production, carcass characteristics, pelt value, and adaptability to the environment.

"What was the perfect sheep 10 years ago may not be the perfect sheep today," Waldron noted.

He said he doubts that cross-breeds will have a long-term impact on the industry. Rather, he expects they will help producers gain genetic diversity within their flocks while they work toward purifying the flock individuals toward breed strengths.

As far as ewe survivability is concerned, Waldron reported that 91 percent of the Dorper flock survived the first year verses 94 percent of Rambouillets. Survival to weaning showed both Dorper and Rambouillet flocks at 78 percent. Roughly 97 percent of the Dorper flock survived from weaning to the target slaughter weight, while 98 percent of the Rambouillets survived.

"No significant difference in fertility was observed," Waldron said after recounting that 96 percent of the Dorper ewes lambed and 92 percent of the Rambouillet ewes lambed in 2005 and 2006.

According to Waldron's study abstract, breed average lamb weights at birth and weaning were similar. Birth weights showed 9.6 pounds from Dorper ewes and 10.2 pounds for lambs from Rambouillet ewes, while weaning weights were 64 pounds for lambs from Dorper ewes and 67 pounds for Rambouillets.

Lamb production differences between Dorper and Rambouillet were small, as were the difference in results discovered in other categories.

"The study is a progress report based on the first two years of data from a multi-year project," said Waldron, who reminded listeners to keep tabs on the ongoing research that he and others at the center are doing.