

VA Tech Forage-based Ram Evaluation paying-off for producers

Sheep producers are finding new ways to combat parasites, and put dollars in their pockets with some help from the Virginia Tech Southwest Virginia Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

The center, located in Glade Spring, Virginia, is home to the Southwest Virginia Forage-based Ram Test. The ram test, now in its seventh year, is the only program in the U.S. evaluating rams through a forage-based performance test designed specifically to quantify post-weaning growth and parasite resistance. The test provides a mechanism for which ram lambs can be evaluated among their peers from other flocks in a standardized environment. It also results in an offering of outstanding ram lambs for sale with a vast amount of production data collected. This year there are 115 rams on test, with 30 consignors from 10 states participating.

Since its inaugural year in 2012, the test has evaluated nearly 800 rams, of which 177 of the top performers have been marketed through the sale. Several of these rams are now having progeny come back to the test for evaluation, and allowing researchers to validate data findings from previous years. Rams from previous sales have been sold to producers in 15 states nationwide, as far north as Wisconsin, and as far south as Florida and Texas.

“Internal parasites are among the leading health concerns for sheep, and potentially pose dramatic economic losses for many producers, especially those in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions of the U.S. where forage-based production is an ideal management system for livestock,” said Scott Greiner, Virginia Cooperative Extension sheep specialist and professor of animal and poultry science. “The value-added research and data collected on these rams is a huge asset to both seedstock and commercial producers around the country making selections for their breeding program.”

Chris and Mandy Fletcher of Abingdon, Virginia know first-hand the value of having this data available on their rams. The Fletchers have purchased a new ram from the test sale every year from 2013 to 2017, and have had lambs from their own flock evaluated every year. Having data from the 70 day trial period helps make their selection based on growth and parasite resistance much more reliable for new breeding sires and assists with management and culling decisions for their flock.

“Each year our genetics and parasite resistance have improved. We haven’t had to deworm our mature ewes in over 4 years,” said Chris. He added that growth, parasite resistance, and survivability of their lambs have greatly improved by utilizing the test data and new breeding sires.

As a local veterinarian, Chris shares his personal experience with his clients. Nearly 90 percent of his sheep-related medical calls are related to parasite issues. He spends a lot of time stressing the value of parasite control through improved genetics. He says using a ram with increased parasite resistance would easily pay for itself with a decrease in health costs and flock mortality rates.

The SWAREC also provides education to producers at its annual field day and sale. This year the event will take place on **Friday September, 21 at the SWAREC in Glade Spring.** Researchers and Extension specialists from Virginia Tech provide information on a variety of management and nutrition topics.

“Our goal with the ram test program has been to demonstrate the tools and application of strategies which can be utilized on-farm for genetic improvement of parasite resistance. The Fletchers are a testimony to the benefits of putting these practices in place and they are recognizing the benefits on their farm and the farms of their customers” said Greiner.

For more information about the program as well as field day and sale visit the website at: <https://www.apsc.vt.edu/extensionandoutreach/Sheep-Extension/sheep-programs/swarec-ram-test.html>