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Awassi Sheep Production and the Development of breeding Program Options in Syria

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Abstract

The fat-tailed Awassi sheep is the only sheep breed in Syria adapted to the harsh environmental conditions and it is distributed all over the country. There are about 13.5 million heads of Awassi sheep in Syria contributing 78%, 30% and 100% of the total red meat, milk and wool production, respectively. Awassi sheep is the most important livestock animals, grazing on poorly developed wheat and barley fields and on the remains of crops such as wheat and corn. The price of mutton of the Awassi breed, which is in high demand in Syria, was about 35% higher than beef in 1995. These animals are raised under three husbandry systems (extensive, semi-intensive, and intensive). To improve Awassi sheep the General Commission for Scientific Agricultural Research (GCSAR) in Syria established few stations located across the country. The commission intends to produce specialised lines of animals for milk and meat production. Its target is to distribute those animals to farmers and test the on-farm performance of the sheep. Despite this effort, Awassi sheep in Syria produce on average 200–300 kg milk per year compared to Israel, which was able to double milk production (over 500 kg) of its strain through intensive selection. This study aims to analyse breeding objectives and effective breeding programs. During the first step of the study production systems characterised, breeding objectives determined and local as well as regional breeding activities implemented by sheep producer identified. In a second step the effective of government breeding stations with regard to their impact will be evaluated and alternative breeding programs including a “young ram” scheme analysed in relation to genetic progress and the operational challenges.

Keywords: Awassi, Production, Sheep, Syria