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Management of Awassi Sheep Flocks in Syria

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Abstract

Sheep in Syria are considered an essential component of the livelihood system of poor farmers. Sheep are distributed over the country, but mostly concentrated in the areas receiving less than 250–300 mm average rainfall annually (app. 55 % of the total country area) mainly including steppes and pastures. About 21 million heads of Awassi sheep (the only sheep breed kept) contribute 76 %, 31 % and 100 % of the country's total red meat, milk and wool production, respectively. Awassi is a multi purpose animal and well adapted to the harsh environmental conditions. A first step to develop breeding programs for Awassi sheep in Syria is the understanding of the production system and objectives. One part of this step is to have clear view about flock management. The objectives of this study are to describe the management practices of Awassi sheep keepers in Syria. A study was carried out during summer 2006 and 2007, involving 105 sheep keepers of four different eco-zones. Individual questionnaire interviews were used. The flock owner is the decision maker, and only 23 % of sheep keepers hire people as shepherd. Grazing is most important source of fodder, supplementation with concentrates became very necessary to maintain feeding levels of the animals during summer. Seasonal east-west movements looking for good rangelands and pastures were recognised. The application of a governmental immunisation programme against prevalent diseases (Enterotoxaemia, Pasteurellosis, Brucellosis, Sheep Pox and Foot and Mouth disease) differs between the regions, all sheep keepers in southern, middle and eastern areas immunize there animals while this is done in only 60 % of the flocks the northern area.

Awassi ewes have a long breeding season (end of May to early September) with a breeding peak occurring between June and August. Because rams are always with the flock, few out-of-season mating may occur. Age of the lambs is the main factor for weaning. Breeding animals are selected based on the individual experience of the sheep keepers (76 % of all flock owners) and 24 % ask another sheep keeper for advice. Almost all sheep keepers (98 %) use performance characteristics as selection criteria.

Keywords: Breeding program development, traditional sheep hearing, health care, Syria