

Record-keeping Practices on U.S. Sheep Operations

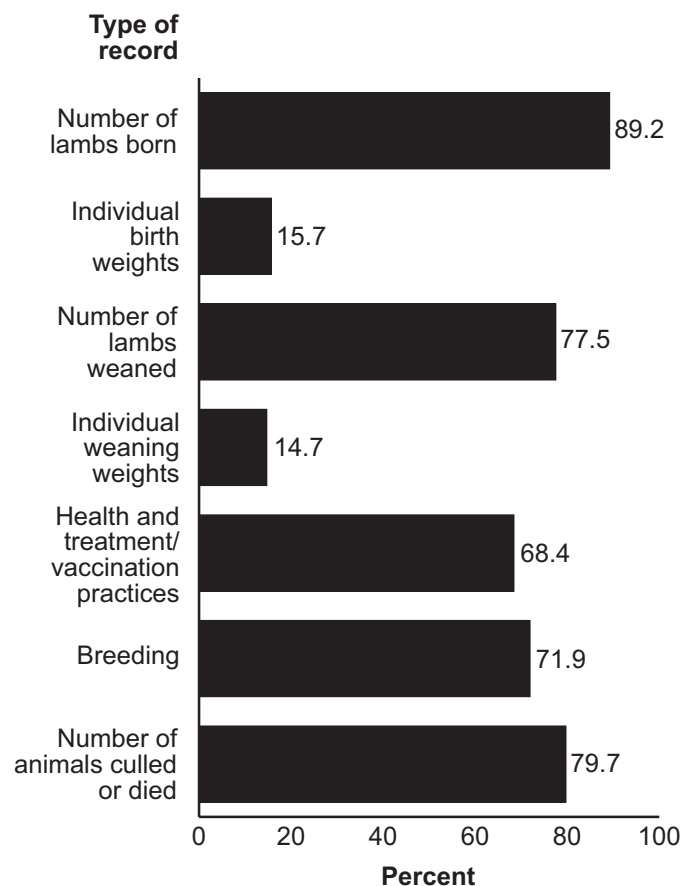
For its Sheep 2011 study, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) collected data on sheep health and management practices from a representative sample of operations in 22 of the Nation’s major sheep-producing States.¹ These operations represented 85.5 percent of the U.S. ewe inventory and 70.1 percent of U.S. farms with ewes.

Keeping accurate records allows producers to calculate flock productivity and establish flock benchmarks. Record-keeping systems range from simple pocket notebooks to sheep management software programs. Some commonly tracked measures include finances, productivity, reproductive outcomes, flock health, individual animal treatments, and changes in management practices.

The percentage of sheep operations that keep production records has increased in the last decade. For example, the NAHMS Sheep 2001 study reported that 67.9 percent of all operations kept some form of production records, while the Sheep 2011 study reported that 86.7 percent of all operations kept records. These percentages are somewhat misleading, however, because in the 2001 study all operations with 1 or more ewes were asked about record-keeping practices, while in the 2011 study only operations with 20 or more ewes were asked about record keeping. Still, when comparing operations of similar size from both the 2001 and 2011 studies (25 to 99 and 20 to 99 ewes, respectively), a higher percentage of operations in 2011 than in 2001 kept production records (85.1 and 76.5 percent, respectively).

In 2011, over half of all operations with 20 or more ewes (55.9 percent) kept handwritten records, and 5.1 percent kept computerized records exclusively. Just over one-fourth of operations kept both handwritten and computerized records. Of operations that used some form of record keeping during 2011, 89.2 percent kept records on the number of lambs born (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Of operations with 20 or more ewes that kept records during 2010, percentage of operations by type of records kept

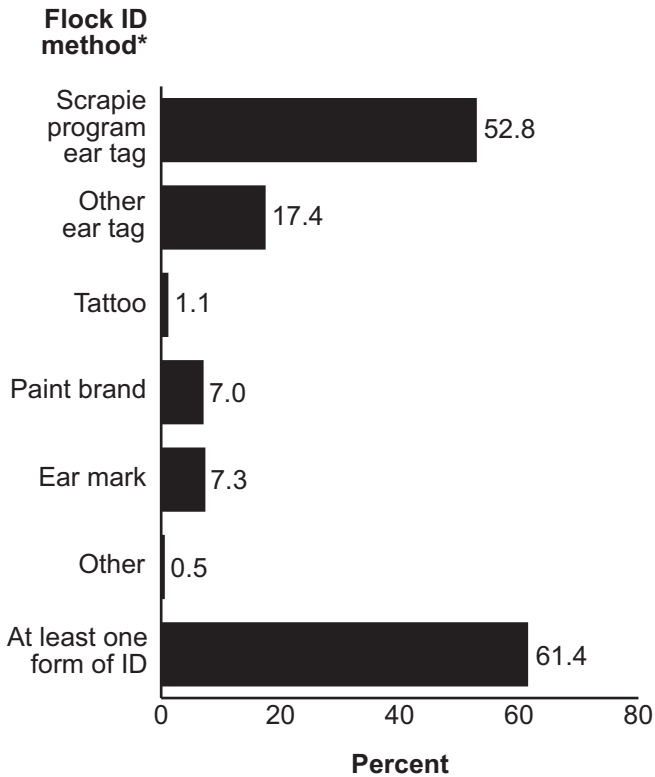


Individual-animal and flock identification (ID) facilitate accurate record keeping and are an important part of industry efforts to control diseases. The most basic record keeping requires some kind of individual-animal ID, even if it is temporary. Individual-animal ID allows producers to track the performance of each animal, calculate flock averages when making culling decisions, and observe drug withdrawal periods for treated animals. Overall, 88.6 percent of operations used at least one form of individual-animal ID.

¹ **States:** California, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming

Overall, 61.4 percent of operations used at least one form of flock ID. The percentage of operations that used at least one form of flock ID increased as operation size increased; 96.1 percent of large operations (500 or more ewes) used at least one form of flock ID compared with 39.5 percent of very small operations (1 to 19 ewes). Scrapie-program ear tags were used by 52.8 percent of operations, and 17.4 percent of operations used an ear tag other than the scrapie tag (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of operations by flock ID method(s) used



*All animals in flock have the same ID.

The accelerated National Scrapie Eradication Program (NSEP) requires most breeding animals and all animals over 18 months of age to have official ID before interstate transport or change of ownership. Lambs under 18 months of age that are moving through slaughter channels are not required to have an official scrapie identification tag. Producers can obtain official ear tags for free from the USDA. More information on scrapie and the NSEP can be found at: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/animal_diseases/scrapie/.

Conclusion

Overall, record keeping in the U.S. sheep industry has improved since the NAHMS Sheep 2001 study. Ear tags are the most common form of individual-animal and flock ID used, in large part due to the enactment of the NSEP and the availability of free official ear tags from the USDA. To maximize the benefits of using a record-keeping system, producers should try to record information regularly. As more information is gathered using the record-keeping system, producers can utilize the information to determine performance averages for their flock and to improve areas that are most important to the success of the operation.

For more information, contact:

USDA-APHIS-VS-CEAH-NAHMS
 NRRRC Building B, M.S. 2E7
 2150 Centre Avenue
 Fort Collins, CO 80526-8117
 970.494.7000
<http://nahms.aphis.usda.gov>

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