

Points of View

A forum for sharing perspectives from across the Canadian Sheep Industry



CANADIAN SHEEP FEDERATION

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Myth: Association and government reps are doing everything they can to adequately meet the needs of the industry.

One might argue that I'm deliberately trying to pick a fight with this topic – that I'm being unfair, or that I'm not recognizing the hard work of several associations and government bodies – both provincial and federal – that is done on behalf of Canadian sheep producers.

In no way am I suggesting that people are not working as hard as they can with the limited resources available to best serve the needs of our industry.

The intent of this topic though is to use the myth to get people thinking about what we really want and need from these groups. Government extension staff and producer organizations are just as important to the long-term sustainability of the sheep industry as the retailers, processors and producers themselves. Let's consider what role they should be playing in that long-term sustainability. What value do they provide? What are they doing well, and more importantly, what could they be doing better to serve the interests of the industry? What's the opportunity?

I think we've established that we make every effort to be fair with Points of View; this isn't meant to be a forum for venting or bashing our colleagues. So we asked our contributors to keep that in mind as they wrote us with their opinions. Whether they wanted to stand up to support work that is being done or if they thought there was room for improvement – we asked them to back up their position. It's important that any critique gets delivered with an equal focus on solutions.

Thank you to those who did take the time to weigh in on this topic, particularly given its sensitive nature. These issues of Points of View couldn't be developed without these contributions from passionate and committed people who all share a common objective.

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P.S. I've written an essay on what the current media environment can tell us about the opportunities for our industry. You'll find it on page 7 where the case study normally appears. Which reminds me – if you have a suggestion for a case study topic or someone in the industry you'd like to see profiled, please let me know. We want to give some exposure to those success stories that we can all learn from. Email me directly, or send your suggestions to pointsofview@cansheep.ca.

Myth: Association and government reps are doing everything they can to adequately meet the needs of the industry.

Margaret Cook

Executive Director, Albert Sheep and Wool Commission, Alberta Lamb

I would have preferred to see a more positive focus to the March "Points of View". The myth could have stated that "Association and government reps are failing to do all they can to adequately meet the needs of the industry."

Initially the myth stated reads (roughly paraphrased) "Government and Association reps are not doing enough..." then you go on to say, "In no way am I suggesting that people are not working as hard as they can with the limited resources available to best serve the needs of our industry." I realize that the aim of POV is to stimulate discussion, let's hope it is constructive and not defensive or negative. There are few government representatives these days. Education and primary production do not feature in their activities, at least not in Alberta.

I'm curious what it is Government and Association reps should be doing that they are not? I'm also curious where that opinion comes from... what is it that backs up this position? Informed producer surveys? Analysis of the services delivered by these bodies relative to their mandate? Lack of growth in the industry – and if so, are those bodies not addressing the issues, or are they actually able to make (as opposed to simply influence) producers, the economy, the market, the Value Chain, and all of the parties involved move in a specific direction? Are there specific, actionable, steps or programs that those parties should be doing that they are not? Is the Canadian Sheep Federation included in this group?

So in the spirit of offering solutions – I agree that we need to constantly be challenging ourselves to do the following:

- Focus on our member/customer-driven mandate
- Ensure that the strategic direction of the organization is in alignment with that mandate
- Do the right things as well as can be done within the constraints that all organizations face today

"I challenge all producers and industry stakeholders to support and assist their provincial representation by providing productive feedback on current activities as well as input on future needs, direction and focus."

Our organization, for example, is just completing a survey of our membership to ensure that we are still on track with their priorities and that we are providing the value they are looking for. If not, we will adjust what we do, and/or how we deliver those services. In addition, we have just analyzed the Value Chain and market so that we have the latest relevant information at hand to make strategic decisions with.

Continued on next page

Myth: Association and government reps are doing everything they can to adequately meet the needs of the industry.

Margaret Cook continued

With both of those inputs, we will plan our future actions so that we can maximize not only the sustainability of the market, but also the viability and quality of the industry for consumers and for our producers.

I agree – “What is the opportunity?” is an important question. The opportunity with a column like "Points of View" is to ask questions that get us new answers to old questions. I challenge all producers and industry stakeholders to support and assist their provincial representation by providing productive feedback on current activities as well as input on future needs, direction and focus.

I'd be happy to hear, and respond to, direct, specific and constructive suggestions about what supporting bodies could be doing better as we at ASWC are always looking for ways to improve!

"A positive attitude (missionary zeal) is needed to be a good extension worker. Nothing can engender this zeal like the acceptance of some information extended. A positive attitude by the farmer is a reward to the extension worker."

- Graham Reid

Graham Reid

Sheep Producer, Nova Scotia

Extension service is an essential goods and services for our industry. We have been without a designated extension service (in Nova Scotia) for several years. It was a victim of the budgetary cuts – the “producers” were cut by the superfluous administrators. Perhaps we were guilty of not adequately availing ourselves of service.

A good extensions service should be equally guided by the recipients and provider (funding organization). There are good extension workers as there are good farmers. Australia used the Canadian model of extension to convert its wool production to lamb production. However, there has to be a concerted effort by both parties to make it work.

We know that there are many in this province who have some sheep (2-10 head). Do we offer extension service at this level? Because we never know what embryo will be a star. A word of advice or encouragement at the proper time can have amazing results.

A positive attitude (missionary zeal) is needed to be a good extension worker. Nothing can engender this zeal like the acceptance of some information extended. A positive attitude by the farmer is a reward to the extension worker.

The necessity for extension workers lies in the continuity of the flow of information. It should be looked upon as a “selling job” of information.

Myth: Association and government reps are doing everything they can to adequately meet the needs of the industry.

Bev Greenwell

P. Ag., Sheep Producer and President, BC Sheep Federation

I believe that our association(s) and government reps ARE doing everything they can to meet the needs of the industry, however I also believe the producer associations are being forced to address too many issues, too fast, over too short a time frame for producers to absorb. Our government reps have been reduced in both time allowances and in mandates to help producers over the last three decades. Extension people have no control over other government policies that affect the sustainability of our industry. There is an adversarial mindset in the producer community, which I believe has been brought about by overload. The natural response to overload is to shut down. Shutdown happens in numerous ways: shutdown to associations, shutdown to government, and/or finally shutdown by selling one's flock (quitting). It is very difficult to change one's mindset once it has been established.

Government policies have been devastating to our BC sheep industry, from local municipal governments, right up through provincial and then federal government policies.

"... producer associations are being forced to address too many issues, too fast, over too short a time frame for producers to absorb."

Issues affecting us:

- Domestic dog control regulations
- Gun regulations in urban/suburban areas
- Farm property taxation changes
- Agricultural Land Reserves
- Protection of wildlife
- Environmental regulations regarding watering livestock, manure spreading, land drainage/irrigation, pesticide/veterinary medicine use regulations (Waste Management Act)
- Forestry grazing, big horn sheep proximity (Range management Act, Forest Range Act)
- Meat inspection regulations (Ministry of Health), SRM (animal waste) disposal
- PST, GST, farm fuel tax regulations, green carbon tax regulations
- Privacy policy regulations
- BSE, Scrapie
- National ID, RFID tags
- Farm location identification
- Animal welfare
- On Farm Food safety
- Bluetongue regulations
- Import/export inequalities, not a level playing field

Bev Greenwell continued

Each of these issues, involving many different ministries and departments, as they came/ come on stream, has lead or lead to, the loss of producers and/or production numbers, which further lead to loss of industry infrastructure (i.e. feed plants/fertilizer suppliers, abatoirs, etc.) making it even more difficult for remaining producers to be profitable.

Over the same 30 years or so that the above issues have had to be addressed by extension personnel, associations and producers, the general public, particularly the urban public has grown farther away from where their food comes from. Most would never associate a bag of Doritos with corn, or a shepherd's pie with lamb.

Adding to all the above is the demographics of our producers – most being over age 50. With land values at an all time high, younger people are prohibited from entering the farming arena, and retirement is looking very attractive to existing producers. It doesn't take much of an 'issue' to push existing producers into retirement.

There is however, a renewed interest in where our food comes from and how it is produced. Currently we have an opportunity to capitalize on this, but in BC it is through niche marketing, not through any single buyer/processor/distributor. The 100 mile diet is in our favour. This kind of marketing involves smaller sized flocks, making marketing manageable for a ma and pa show.

People are prepared to pay for premium product, produced by sustainable and humane methods and they need to feel comfortable that it is what is purported to be.

Letter to the Editor

"If the chain of lamb production has a weak link it cannot be successfully sustained over a long period of time."

Daina Hunter

Sheep Producer, Land's End Farm, Ontario

I am the secretary of OSMA District 5 and I have been involved in the sheep industry for 21 years. I have been active at the District level as secretary, chair and treasurer. I have a small flock of 40 CharollaisX ewes. Our Land's End Farm in Wellington County was one of the first four farms that embryo-transferred the Charollais breed into Ontario. The first lambs dropped in 1996. We have concentrated in producing a top-grade carcass quality lamb raised without antibiotics and vaccines. We normally hit the higher end prices at the stockyards.

Lamb and all associated products are commodities...and as such they are ruled by the laws of economics. If the chain of lamb production has a weak link it cannot be successfully sustained over a long period of time. Case in point was the Forward Contract. It fell apart because the prices either paid out or received were not satisfactory over time, to the producer, as well as the processor. There were also issues of inconsistent quality, lack of policing of contract, etc.

For sustainability the sheep industry has to be seen as such...an industry. We know that there is an increasing demand for product. At least, the sheep industry needs federally inspected processing facilities to allow movement of product into a wider marketplace. Adequate payment for ALL parties along the chain has to be sustainable over time to uphold production.

Farmers are sitting ducks when it comes to selling lamb at auction. Because of the live commodity aspect and the fact that one doesn't want these animals back for bio-security reasons...the price has to be accepted...whether or not one is either ready to burn the farm or take a Florida vacation with any given pay check.

Letter to the Editor continued

Those producers that niche market or direct market because they are breeders, volume or artisan product producers have to remain loyal to the cause, to work towards a scenario that allows all lamb producers to receive adequate payment.

Producers would be far happier to plan their production and growth if they knew, in advance the price that their product would fetch in the marketplace. This would mean that a cost of production would have to be established and reviewed, perhaps, on an annual or biannual basis. With increasing feed and fuel prices this cost of production number is very important. New producers will be hard to entice into the production end of things if they do not see that they can meet expenditures with income. Having three children all around the age of 30 I know that that generation although willing to work hard is also not willing to work for next to nothing. An initial very simple cost of production for the sheep industry could be generated...the cost of feed (based on nutritional needs) needed to sustain a ewe that produces and raises a set of twins once a year. The other variables such as barn costs/utilities/equipment, etc. become discretionary decisions.

I had occasion to speak to a well known elderly sheep producer at the AGM in the fall. He had advised his children that the only reason for continuing on in sheep production was if you could not see yourself doing anything else in life regardless of income, education, etc. It had to be a true calling or passion that overruled the lack of income, the back-breaking work and the endless sleepless nights and so on.

One of the drawbacks of the sheep industry is that there are many producers that are not dependent on their lamb income to make a living. After being yanked around at the stockyards they still have milk in the fridge and their kids still go to university. When you are not dependent on the income you have the luxury of not fighting for it.

There needs to be a solidarity and commitment of effort of all producers for the cause and development of the "sheep industry". I believe that the quality and volume of lamb produced (although all qualities are saleable here in Ontario) would rise if the producer was appropriately compensated.

Lamb buyers have complained over many years that the consistency and regular production of product is problematic. Would that be if the payment was relatively consistent throughout the year?

I am convinced that if there was a federally inspected plant that paid attractively and had criteria set out as to what type of lamb it wanted...that there would be producers that would strive to produce it. It has been done before...where attractive incentives as well as penalties levied towards the "inappropriate" have produced a more consistent product. The Nova Scotia Lamb Co-Op...years ago...was able to get what it wanted through the doors, in 8 months time, with adequate monetary incentives.

Since the deadline looms I am going to stop my points of view for now. I am not sure anymore if I am on track for anything that you wanted to hear, however I did get some stuff off my chest.

Thanks for the opportunity.

Daina Hunter
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Local Food Fad Creates Opportunity

As one of our contributors pointed out in this issue of Points of View, there is a growing appetite among the general public for information about food. Consumers are increasingly curious about how their food is produced, and lately, where it's produced. A glance at the mass media supports this notion. It's hard to pick up a newspaper or magazine without seeing a reference to local food and its impact on the consumer's diet, environment, economy and more. Is it just the latest fad? Will it stick? No one knows for sure, and the debate about its relevance continues. But what I would like to suggest is that while we have this captive audience, let's seize the opportunity to get the word out about Canadian lamb.

The April 2008 issue of Canadian Living magazine included a feature recipe section about lamb. I was pleasantly surprised to see the editors lead in with messages about buying local, and referring to Canadian lamb as being among the best in the world. The feature wasn't listed on the cover, and if you weren't looking for it you might miss it. But this story reinforces for me the opportunity to get positive messages into the marketplace as often as we can. Because apparently, the marketplace is willing to listen, as the Canadian Living article demonstrates.

The table of contents reads, "On the Lamb. Canada produces some of the best lamb in the world. Here's how to buy, cook and serve it". Additionally, among the eight recipes, spanning six pages, is a text box that reads "Buying local lamb not only ensures excellent quality but also helps the environment. Food sourced locally requires the burning of less fossil fuel to get to your table than food trucked or flown in from hundreds (or even thousands) of miles away. Canada produces some of the most delicious lamb in the world – so get to know your butcher and support local farmers." Pick up a copy of the magazine and turn to page 131 so you can see for yourself. We have a lot to be proud of!

But, despite the enthusiasm some consumers have for locally produced lamb, we can't fall into the trap and get complacent; we can't assume that the opinion that Canada produces some of the best lamb in the world will always be the case. Instead, let's use this opportunity to prove to consumers that we are worthy of the claim. No matter how good we might feel about our product, let's make constant improvement a goal. Let's listen to what the market wants and make sure we are exceeding expectations. Whether it's about the quality or the consistency of the supply, we owe it to the consumer, and to ourselves, to do the best we can.

Jennifer Fleming

Your feedback is essential!

The dialogue has started, but we need to hear more about what you think in order to keep this forum going. Its success depends how much everyone in the sheep industry weighs in with their own perspectives and suggestions for change.

Tell us:

- What you think about “Points of View”
- If you had a strong reaction – either good or bad – to the contributions or letters in this issue
- If you want to contribute to an upcoming issue
- If you have a topic you’d like to see addressed
- If you have a story that would make a good case study for others to learn from

Few people get the opportunity to have their opinions heard. This is yours.

Send your comments, suggestions and questions to pointsofview@cansheep.ca or call CSF at 519-824-6018 or 1-888-684-7739.

In the next issue...

Myth: There’s nothing that can be done to manage shrinking margins.

Shrinking margins affect everyone in the industry, from the producer to the retailer. Despite market forces, everyone has the opportunity to look at their operation and seek out even greater efficiencies to ensure that profits are maximized – particularly producers. What can they do to manage the negative pressure on margins – in both the short term and the long term? What resources are available to help? What can they learn from other sectors in the industry?

In this next issue we’ll ask producers to let us know about some of the efforts they’ve made to maximize their profits. What’s worked, and what hasn’t? What do provincial associations and government have to say on the topic? Are they in a position to help the producer who’s looking for guidance? If so, how?

Let us know what you think. We’d love to include your contribution to this discussion in the April 2008 issue of Points of View. Get in the dialogue – your opinion matters! Send your comments to pointsofview@cansheep.ca, or contact Jennifer Fleming directly at 1-888-684-7739 or jennifer@cansheep.ca.