

AASRP Sessions

Moderators: Joan Dean Rowe

Rules of engagement: The veterinarian's role on a goat dairy and how to become part of the dairy team

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Abstract

Goat dairies share many similarities with cow dairy operations, yet are also uniquely different in certain aspects. A dairy production veterinarian has extensive knowledge that can be translated into small ruminant practice with a little background information. This article discusses ways in which goat and cow dairy operations are both similar and different. This knowledge will then allow a practitioner to develop a more extensive goat dairy practice that meets the needs of the producer.

Key words: dairy, goats, consulting, herd health

Résumé

Les élevages de chèvres destinés à la production laitière partagent bien des similarités avec les élevages de vaches laitières bien qu'ils en soient aussi différents. Un vétérinaire spécialisé dans la production laitière possède une vaste connaissance qui peut s'étendre aux élevages de petits ruminants après l'acquisition d'un minimum de renseignements généraux. Cette présentation s'attarde à la similarité et aux différences qui existent entre les élevages de vaches et de chèvres destinés à la production laitière. Cette connaissance servira aux vétérinaires afin de développer la pratique d'élevage de chèvres laitières pour répondre aux besoins du producteur.

Introduction

Veterinarians who work with cow dairies provide active input into specific practices on a regular basis: reproduction management, herd health consultation, peripartum management, and calf/heifer health and management. Trade magazines, journals, conferences, and pharmaceutical companies continually provide information for cattle veterinarians to improve their

knowledge of these areas and expertise. Goat dairies operate under the same management concepts, but a key difference is that there is almost no infrastructure to support the industry.

Veterinarians can play a major role in these operations by helping maintain healthy, disease free animals. On a larger scale, the goat dairy industry continues to grow and develop. The demand for individual animal care is not nearly as great as the opportunity to make these producers more profitable and sustainable.

In any advisory situation, the most important aspect is understanding the needs and wants of the advisee. To insert yourself into a role as a management consultant or active veterinarian, the producer needs to feel you know more about managing certain aspects of their operation than they do. Recognizing what is currently happening on the farm and then organizing a plan for the dairy, its employees, and the bank account is where assistance is valuable. Finding the bottlenecks in the operation and creating a plan to improve production and efficiency are management opportunities.

Be Part of the Team

Reproduction management is very important in any operation. No kids = no milk. Goats have a 5-month gestation, which means we do not begin rebreeding at 50 days-in-milk like cattle. Generally, rebreeding begins at 7 months or 210 days-in-milk. Some dairies do not rebreed older does, but let them 'milk through' since dairy goats can have extended lactations which last for years. The negative side of this practice is that these does do not produce herd replacements.

As dairy or beef cattle veterinarians, we already know how to manage herd reproduction and related issues. This is an area that is very underdeveloped in small ruminant production. Ultrasound pregnancy exams with follow up planning of a seasonal breeding schedule and abortion management are key areas for veterinary assistance. It is very easy to extend this

knowledge to small ruminants. Seasonal breeding is the biggest challenge, and day-length regulation via lights or hormonal manipulations with CIDRs are both options, although CIDRs are only approved for use in sheep in the USA.

Abortion management in small ruminants can be a real challenge, and every visit to an operation during breeding or kidding season should include inquiries about abortions. Common causes of infectious abortions are Q Fever, chlamydia, campylobacter, and toxoplasma. The incidence of the abortions may vary, but you should always be looking for signs of abortions since they are so prevalent on goat operations. In particular, a spread out kidding window, a high number of late lactation open does, or lots of open dry goats are indicators of an abortion problem. Poor management of breeding, bucks, and kidding/lambing areas supports high abortion rates also. Mineral deficiencies can also play a part, and selenium and copper status should be assessed in herds with reproductive issues. The skills we use as cattle vets can all cross over. Examples include semen testing of rams and bucks to assess breeding ability and possible infections, rotation of breeding sires throughout the breeding season, proper ratio of eligible females to males, isolation and treatment of aborted females with removal and disposal of aborted fetuses and placentas, and some type of isolation like a kidding pen during parturition to prevent spread of infectious organisms.

Goat dairy operations can suffer tremendous losses from poor close-up management linked to either overcrowding or underfeeding. Pregnancy toxemia is a common cause of death in close-up does. As a veterinarian, this may be the first time you visit the goat dairy. Knowledge of how to manage a close-up pen and diet is the same for a dairy cow or a dairy goat. Housing, bunk space, feed quality, and general health of the group should all be assessed. Cattle veterinarians are very good at body condition scoring cattle and evaluating feed management. These skills should be used in the same manner for goat dairies. Close-up does should not have access to salt or bicarbonate. They should be fed grain at a rate of 1 to 1.5 lb/100 lb (0.45 to 0.68 kg/45 kg) body weight. Alfalfa hay should be available essentially free choice in the close-up period; many goat dairies like to

feed to total clean-up. Close-up does cannot be forced to eat stems. This will limit future production and survivability of the doe and kids. A large dairy doe can easily carry 30% of her body weight in kids and birth fluids; the energy requirement is tremendous.

Recognizing the places on a farm where improvements can be made helps create more work for you, and a profitable operation for your client. The following are basic practices that should occur on every dairy:

- Identify all goats.
- Evaluate all aspects of housing: improve ventilation, reduce crowding, and create separate air space for young stock and does. Mycoplasma in goats can be spread via aerosol. Air quality and airflow are essential to minimizing transmission between goats.
- Begin pasteurized rearing program. This will prevent the spread of infectious diseases from the adult herd to the future milking herd. The goal is to raise a negative replacement flock that will replace the current herd over a 2-year time period.

Your Role as a Consultant

No matter what type of assistance you are providing your clients, the term consultant implies someone with a thorough understanding of how animals move through a system rather just addressing and fixing a problem. A management consultant is solution oriented, while as veterinarians we are trained to be problem oriented. By modifying your approach to a veterinary call, you will be able to solve the problem while addressing the immediate concerns of a sick animal or disease outbreak. Veterinarians have the advantage as consultants of being able to perform both immediate veterinary care and accurate diagnosis of disease while also setting up a plan for future disease eradication. Effective management programs all have a goal of healthy, productive animals. Managing disease and preventing loss will ultimately increase production and profitability. Using these skills can improve the quality of your practice and that of your producers.