

Using your skills as a herd management consultant: A veterinarian's role beyond the blocked pygmy goat

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Abstract

In small ruminant practice, individual animal care can be a large part of a veterinarian's workload. Backyard pet owners use a veterinarian without avail for every hint of bloat, diarrhea, flaky skin, or possible dystocia. Large producers and high-value purebred herds of goats and sheep also have a need for veterinary service. These producers do not demand individual animal care, and often they claim that they know more about their animals than the veterinarian. Although this is often a misconception, there are many cases where we fail to provide what the producer wants. Here is the opportunity waiting to be grasped.

Key words: goats, small ruminant, veterinary, herd health

Résumé

Dans la pratique des petits ruminants, le soin individuel des animaux peut représenter une grande partie de la charge de travail des vétérinaires. Les propriétaires d'animaux domestiques d'arrière-cour font appel aux vétérinaires lorsqu'il y a le moindre indice de ballonnement, de diarrhée, de peau squameuse ou de dystocie potentielle. Les plus grands producteurs et les troupeaux pur-sang de chèvres et de moutons de grande valeur ont aussi besoin des services rendus par les vétérinaires. Ces producteurs ne demandent pas de soins individuels et déclament souvent en connaître plus sur leurs animaux que les vétérinaires. Bien que cette perception soit souvent erronée, il arrive que nous ne donnions pas ce que le producteur attend. Voici donc une chance qui s'offre à nous.

Introduction

Although individual animal care is an essential part of every veterinarian's practice, the need for overall large-scale management assistance is also important. The goat industry is undergoing a tremendous demand for growth as most dairy and meat marketing avenues are expanding. Creameries want more milk. The boutique creamery industry is growing rapidly. Goat meat is the number 1 meat consumed internationally. Consumers want a connection with their food. Small ruminants

fit this model well. Veterinarians can play a major role in these operations in maintaining healthy, disease-free animals. Often times these herds and flocks have a high level of public interfacing, either through the internet or farm tours. Producers are looking for assistance in making these herds 'public friendly'. On a larger scale, the goat dairy and meat industries continue 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.

Providing Herd Management Services

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, the producer needs to feel you know more about managing certain aspects of their operation than they do. I am not implying that you show up and pontificate about everything you know about sheep or goats. Recognizing what is happening on the farm currently and then organizing a plan for the dairy, its employees, and the bank account is where the assistance is valuable. Finding the bottlenecks in the operation and creating a plan to improve production and efficiency are management opportunities.

We will go over some herd scenarios to provide examples of an organized approach to herd health management. Herd number 1: You are called out to assist with parasite issues at a grazing goat dairy. Two goats had been sent to necropsy with a diagnosis of lungworms and *Haemonchus contortus*. When assessing the overall herd health, it was noted that there were feeding issues, housing issues, and there were not enough kids present for the number of does. First, the parasite issue has to be resolved since this is what the producer called for. It is their 'most important' issue and should be addressed first. A plan is made to rotationally graze the milkers and deworm only the clinically affected milkers at that time. At dry-off, all does would be dewormed. This plan required management of goat flow changes; including cross fencing, planning flow from pasture to pasture, and creating a calendar that would be followed and monitored. During this meeting, the other issues were brought up: goats were locked in a barn at night with inadequate ventilation; feed trough space was limited in the barn, which was limiting milk production since

goats were only fed supplemental grain at night; and there were only 60 kids for every 100 milkers. At a 200% kidding rate with 50:50 male-female ratio, there should be 100 doe kids born for every 100 does that freshen. You can subtract death loss from this to get a crude estimate of kid-rearing success. Some producers sell extra doe kids, so it is important to ask before making an assessment. In this herd, the kids were dying from pneumonia between 3 weeks and 3 months of age. Necropsy confirmed *Mycoplasma mycoides mycoides* pneumonia as the cause of death. At this point, the whole-herd management plan needs to change if the producer wants to stay in business. They explained that their herd size had been shrinking for 4 years due to fewer replacements entering the herd. The first discussion is whether or not they want to continue milking goats. Once that has been decided, the short and long-term plan goes into effect:

1) ID all goats; 2) Improve all aspects of housing: improve ventilation, reduce crowding, and create separate air space for young stock and does. Mycoplasmas in goats can be spread via aerosol. Air quality and air flow are essential to minimizing transmission between goats. 3) Begin a pasteurized rearing program. Especially in situations where the does are asymptomatic for mycoplasma infection, the whole herd must be considered positive. The goal is to raise a negative replacement flock that will replace the current herd over a 2-year time period.

The list above is very succinct. As a consulting veterinarian, your job is to make this attainable. Create a team approach to get all employees on board for the coming changes. There must be 100% buy-in for success in any operation. An action list, calendar, and revised worker schedule with worker training are key parts of a program such as this. Follow-up monitoring, with the ability to effectively monitor success, is also important. There must be a way for you to monitor progress without being on the farm every day. Regular phone calls, emails, pictures of all questionable or sick animals, and notification of any changes to plans are important. One person on-farm should manage the program, and that person is your contact point. In this case, it took 2 seasons of kids to succeed with pasteurized rearing and then a negative herd. They went from almost bankruptcy to selling extra kids and doubling their herd size over 2 years. A quick fix cannot occur, but being able to recognize where a problem exists is essential. The parasites would not have put this dairy out of business, but the mycoplasma slowly was. Recognizing the places on a farm where improvements can be made helps create more work for you and a profitable operation for your client.

Another place a veterinarian can easily insert him or herself is in reproductive management. As dairy or

beef cattle vets, the bulk of us already know how to manage herd reproduction and related issues. This is an area that is very underdeveloped in small ruminant practice. Ultrasound pregnancy checking exams, with follow-up planning of seasonal breeding schemes and abortion management, are key areas for veterinary assistance. It is very easy to cross over the knowledge that cattle vets have perfected into small ruminants. Seasonal breeding is the biggest challenge, and day-length regulation via lights or hormonal manipulation with CIDRs are both options, although CIDRs are only approved for use in sheep in the US. Abortion management in small ruminants can be a real challenge, and every visit to an operation during breeding or kidding/ lambing season should include inquiries about abortions. In most herds, you should expect to find Q Fever, chlamydia, and toxoplasma abortions. The incidence of the abortions may vary, but you should always be looking for signs of abortions since they are such a common problem on goat operations. Poor management of breeding, bucks, and kidding/lambing areas supports high abortion rates. The skills we use as cattle veterinarians can all cross over in this instance. 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: males, isolation and treatment of aborted females with removal and disposal of aborted fetuses, and some type of isolation, like a kidding pen during parturition, to prevent spread of infectious organisms.

Conclusions

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 than 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.