

SHEEP IMPORT POSSIBILITIES AND PROCEDURES

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Access to foreign sheep genetics could improve the efficiency of production of lamb, wool and sheep's milk in the U.S. It is desirable to import sheep genetics from breeds both present and not present in the U.S. Of course, ancestors of all domestic sheep were imported at sometime in the past so importation of sheep is nothing new.

Many of our present breeds are found in small numbers in the U.S. These breeds can benefit from foreign genetic material of the same breed in order to correct weaknesses or to correct inbreeding depression. Some breeds which could benefit from some breeding from their foreign cousins are Blueface Leicester, Border Leicester, Cheviot, Clun Forest, Cotswold, Karakul, Merino, Finnsheep, Lincoln, North Country Cheviot, Oxford, Romanov, Romney, Scottish Blackface, and Shropshire.

Many foreign breeds have been selected for different traits compared to their counterparts in the U.S. For example, the British Suffolk and Hampshire have been selected for heavier bone and greater muscle expression than have their U.S. counterparts and may be a valuable source of genetics for U.S. Suffolk and Hampshire flocks. The Australian Merino is recognized as the premier fine wool producing sheep of the world and could be used to improve wool production of U.S. Merino and commercial fine-wool flocks.

Some breeds not present in the U.S. may produce more product or product of higher quality than current domestic breeds. Promising breeds should be imported and evaluated along side domestic breeds to see if they have anything to offer the U.S. sheep industry. Several European meat breeds that fit this category include the Charollais, Meatlinec, Bleu du Maine, Ile-de-France, Rouge de l'Ouest, Berrichon du Cher, Vendéen, and Limousine.

Foreign sheep genetics also can assist in the development of new enterprises for which there are no suitable domestic breeds. Such is the dairy sheep industry where European and Middle Eastern breeds produce several times the amount of milk of domestic breeds. Promising foreign dairy breeds include the East Friesian, Lacaune, Assaf, Awassi, Sarda, Chios, and Manchega.

It has been difficult or impossible to import foreign sheep germplasm (live animals, embryos, or semen) from most countries into the U.S. due to regulations administered by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that aim to prevent introduction of foreign animal diseases. The presence of the disease scrapie is one of the main reasons why many countries have been off-limits to U.S. importers. New Zealand and Australia have been the exceptions due to their excellent animal disease status and freedom from scrapie. Live sheep, embryos and semen can be imported from these two countries into any flocks in the U.S. with an import permit. Imported live sheep must be quarantined in a USDA/APHIS facility for 30 days before release into a U.S. flock. The absence of important livestock diseases in these two countries has resulted, in part, from the fact that there have been few sheep imports; therefore, many of the breeds desired by U.S. producers are not found in either New Zealand or Australia.

Recent changes in the USDA/APHIS import regulations now allow the possibility of importation of sheep germplasm into the U.S. from countries in which the only major disease of

concern is scrapie if the imported germplasm goes into U.S. flocks enrolled in the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (VSFCP) (Federal Register, 1996). APHIS is in the process of developing import protocols under these new regulations for specific countries for which there have been requests from U.S. producers to import sheep germplasm. An import permit issued by APHIS is required for each importation. Imported animals or animals resulting from imported embryos or semen have to remain in the original flock until the flock obtains scrapie-free certification (after a minimum of five years on the program) or they can move to other flocks enrolled in the program. Offspring of imported animals and offspring of animals resulting from imported semen or embryos can move to any other flock.

An import permit also must be issued for all sheep germplasm imported from Canada (Federal Register, 1996). The Canadian government allows the importation of sheep germplasm from many countries of western Europe so there are now sheep breeds in Canada that are not in the U.S. Live sheep or sheep resulting from embryos or semen imported into Canada from Europe or live sheep, embryos or semen from Canadian flocks which have imported sheep germplasm from Europe within the past five years can be issued an import permit to enter the U.S. if the animals go into flocks enrolled in the VSFCP. Live sheep, embryos and semen from Canadian flocks which have not imported sheep germplasm for the past five years, except from the U.S., New Zealand and Australia, can be issued an import permit to move into any flock in the U.S.

Import regulations on sheep can change daily. The presence of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle in Europe, no BSE in the U.S. cattle population, and a suspected connection between BSE in cattle and scrapie in sheep has resulted in USDA/APHIS being very cautious about sheep germplasm imports. Current information on sheep import regulations can be obtained by writing or calling Dr. Roger Perkins, Staff Veterinarian, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, National Center for Import and Export, 4700 River Road, Unit 38, Riverdale, MD 20737-1228 (Telephone: 301-734-8170). A copy of VS FORM 17-129 which is to be used when applying for an import permit and instructions for completion of the form can be found at the end of this article.

Dr. Richard Bertz is the overall veterinary coordinator of the VSFCP in Wisconsin. He and the following veterinary field staff administer the VSFCP. The USDA's Wisconsin Veterinary Services Office, Dr. Bertz or the field veterinarian for your county can be contacted for more information if you would like to enroll in the program in order to import sheep germplasm.

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Literature Cited

Federal Register. 1996. Importation of sheep and goats and germ plasm from sheep and goats.
April 19, 1996. Volume 61(77):17231-17243.