

MARKETING OF SHEEP MILK – PROBLEMS FACED BY PROCESSORS

**Sid Cook
Carr Valley Cheese Company, Inc.
La Valle, Wisconsin, USA**

Summary

In the past five years of purchasing sheep milk there have been several issues and problems that we have faced:

- 1) The method of handling and transport
- 2) The milk volume
- 3) The vast variation of components seasonally and the impact on yield
- 4) The inventory and aging of sheep milk cheese
- 5) Concern of milk quality

Milk Delivery

The use of bags and pails was not effective for us. Large amounts of cream and milk stuck to the bags resulting in a 1% or less shrink. This method of transport adds both extra labor for both farm and plant as well as yield loss. For the past two seasons, we have received milk by bulk truck, and it is a vast improvement over years past, but more expensive for us.

Milk Volume

The volume per delivery, because of low per animal production with sheep, and the sizing of our vats resulted in less than batch amounts. In the first years, we would receive 1500 to 2000 pounds of milk per shipment by pails. This method was very inefficient as less than batch amounts cause moisture, texture and yield problems in the cheese as well as extra manufacturing costs.

At this time, we are receiving 8000 or more pounds per shipment by bulk truck, and this delivery system is working much better. Another related issue is seasonality of the milk; we can't purchase sheep milk year round at this time.

Cheese Yield

The yield varies greatly from spring to fall. When we start making cheese in the spring, our yield is 1.5 pounds of cheese per 10 pounds of milk, and we finish late summer and early fall with 1.6 pounds of cheese per 10 pounds of milk peaking at 1.8 pounds per 10 pounds of milk. It would be a great advantage to both producer and processor if a system was set up to pay more for high component milk. This would make both producer and processor more efficient.

Milk Quality; Aging and Inventory of Cheese

Because we make all hard and semi-hard cheese, it is necessary to age hard sheep milk cheese varieties at least six months so that sheep flavor notes are prominent. This makes it necessary to charge prices to cover the expense of the sheep milk, aging and inventory costs and money opportunity costs. We generally age our sheep milk cheeses one year and sell the cheese produced in one year in the following year. Storing the whole year of cheese until the next is expensive and capital consuming.

As a buyer of sheep milk in Wisconsin, we are required to commit and contract for sheep milk as much as three years in advance. It is difficult to forecast sales that far into the future. We are always concerned that we will have too little sheep milk, rather than too much. Our future sales depend on the quality of the milk first, then the quality of cheese-making. We have consistently won many awards with all of our cheeses including sheep and mixed milk varieties. It has not been an easy task to become a consistent sheep milk processor.

Conclusions

In conclusion, sheep milk processing has become a viable business for us over the past 5 years. We expect our demand to increase 20 to 40 percent over the next 5 years with some variation from year to year. We see a bright future with both processor and farmer working together to develop sheep milk dairying and products.