TECHNICAL NOTES

Sheep Producers' Reasons for Ceasing Farm-Flock Operations in Kansas

ROBERT J. ROBEL AND ROBERT L. MEDUNA

Abstract

During a study of losses of sheep to canine predators in south-central Kansas, we surveyed sheep producers no longer in business to determine why they ceased operations. Advancing age and/or poor health and predator problems were the reasons most producers listed for quitting business.

This study was a small portion of a larger project (Robel et al. 1981), that evaluated the efficacy of several husbandry methods in reducing sheep losses to coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and dogs. Descriptions of the farm-flock sheep industry and topography of the study area are presented in Robel et al. (1981). Kansas ranked 14th in sheep production in the United States during 1975-1976 when this study was conducted but the number of sheep produced in Kansas had declined during the previous 15 years (Kansas State Board of Agriculture 1976).

Methods

All members on the Kansas Sheep Association mailing list in a 9-county area of south-central Kansas were contacted by mail and requested to participate in our sheep husbandry study. Of those contacted, 225 reported that they were no longer in the sheep production business. Questionnaires were mailed to those 225 former sheep producers who ceased operations between 1973 and 1975. They were provided a list of causes for ceasing operations and asked to check the primary reason. They also were asked to list other contributing factors. Copies of survey forms and cover letters are in Meduna (1977). Additionally, 12 sheep producers who were cooperating in our 15-month sheep husbandry study sold their operations and the reasons for their doing so were determined.

Results and Discussion

Of the 225 questionnaires sent to former sheep producers in the study area, 122 (54.2%) were completed and returned. Advancing years and/or poor health and problems with predators were the two most commonly listed reasons they gave for ceasing sheep operations (Table 1). Advancing age and/or poor health was listed as the primary cause by 36 (39.1%) of the 92 producers listing a primary cause for ceasing operations, and as a secondary cause by 19 (21.1%) of the 90 former sheep producers who indicated contributing causes. Predator problems were listed as the primary cause

Table 1. Reasons given by 122 former sheep producers in south-central Kansas for terminating farm-flock sheep business, 1975-76.

Reason	Primary cause ¹	Contributing factors
Advancing age and/or poor health	36	19
Problems with predators	26	17
Switched to other agricultural production	9	16
Unprofitability of sheep operation	6	12
Other employment	3	4
Difficulty finding shearers	1	6
Labor requirements too high	0	4
Marketing problems	0	3
Other	11	9

¹Only 92 sheep producers listed a primary reason for terminating their operation; contributing factors were cited 90 times.

by 26 (28.3%), and a secondary cause by 17 (18.9%). Switching to other farm operations and unprofitability of sheep production combined were listed as primary reasons for going out of the sheep business by 15 (16.3%) former producers, and as contributing causes by 28 (31.1%). Other reasons for quitting were listed much less frequently.

Of the 12 sheep producers who sold their sheep operations during our sheep husbandry study, 6 did so because of advancing age, 2 because of labor problems, 2 because of economic problems, 1 because of reproductive problems in his sheep flock, and 1 because of predator problems.

Results from our survey of reasons for farm-flock sheep producers going out of business were similar to results for range operations in the West. Gee and Magleby (1976) noted that few young persons were entering sheep production and that about 10% of the current producers probably would retire within the decade. Gee et al. (1977) predicted a continued decline in sheep producers barring a substantial increase in persons entering sheep production.

Responses provided by former sheep producers in our Kansas study indicated that predators were considered an important reason for going out of business. Predators often have been implicated in the decline of the sheep industry (Early et al. 1974, Johnson and Gartner 1975, Pearson 1975, Gee and Magleby 1976). Our data support such claims, i.e., 26 of 122 (21.3%) of the producers listed predator problems as the primary reason for quitting the sheep business. That figure may reinforce our finding that 80% of all sheep losses were suffered by 22% of the sheep producers (Robel et al. 1981). Although the 1% average annual loss of sheep to predators in Kansas (Robel et al. 1981) is extremely low, averages often are misleading. Higher than average losses experienced by some sheep producers may cause them to cease operations or pursue other agricultural opportunities. A business-mined sheep producer

Authors are professor of wildlife biology and graduate research assistant, respectively, Division of Biology, Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station, Kansas State University, Manhattan 66506. The junior author now is an area wildlife biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Wilcox 68982.

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faced with fairly low but constant losses is likely to liquidate the sheep flock if economic conditions indicate that alternative husbandry methods are not economically feasible.

Several former producers terminated their sheep operations in favor of other livestock (cattle or swine) or cash crops like wheat, soybeans, and/or milo. Such changes are rather common in Kansas and reflect changing economic forces in the agricultural sector.

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