

Today's Sheep Industry



Elko County sheep at mid-day watering

Who knew? I had heard the sheep industry was about dead, but not according to the American Sheep Industry Association web site, which says the industry is doing well, just not in Nevada.

China currently has 173 million sheep, followed by Australia and India. During 2010, the United States had 5.6 million sheep and produced 30 million pounds of wool. Texas raised one million sheep followed by California, Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota. Nevada ranked 22nd with 75,000 sheep and 33rd with 250 sheep operators.

The American Sheep Industry Association recently conducted a survey of operators in Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. 47% of respondents raised less than 100 sheep and 57% of respondents were between 51 and 70 years of age. When asked what restrains any expansion of their operations, one of the top concerns was not having anyone ready to take over the operation after retirement. A second top concern was the cost and availability of labor.

Operators reported that 39% of animal deaths were from predators, amounting to a loss of \$20.5 million. 60.5% of those predator kills were by coyotes, followed by 13.3% by dogs, and 5.7% by mountain lions. Bears, fox, eagles, wolves and bobcats also kill sheep and lambs.

Non-lethal means of predator protection include fencing, night penning, guard animals (guard dogs, donkeys and llamas) and lambing sheds. They also use electric fences and noise-making devices. During 2004, ranchers spent \$9.8 million on such non-lethal control measures.

Pete Paris is a local sheep man and past president of the Nevada Wool Growers Association. He told me at one time Nevada had one million sheep. He feels one of the reasons for the decline in sheep production is owners of past sheep operations having little hands-on experience with sheep. Basque foremen, sheep herders and camp tenders took care of things. As Basques left the business and others stopped coming to Nevada specifically to work with sheep, they were replaced by Peruvian, Chilean and Mexican sheep herders. That Basque experience was lost and many of the sheep operators got out of the business.

Most sheep operations today are smaller, with lambing conducted indoors rather than maintaining large flocks on the range. Predator issues and government regulations have also played their parts in the decline. Today, the only two operators in Elko County are the Little Paris Sheep Company and Ellison Ranches.

Pete is a definite promoter of sheep. He feels some people would like to get back into sheep operations but one problem is finding places to put them until the issues between domestic sheep and wild bighorn sheep can be resolved. He feels sheep can be managed in ways that makes them

environmentally friendly. Sheep move around more than cattle and his sheep make a 250-mile round trip each year. He also feels many of Nevada's mountain ranges are more suitable for sheep than cattle.

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