

2016 Sheep Industry Roadmap Update

The Sheep Industry Roadmap was created to bring all sectors of the sheep industry together to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the American Sheep Industry. With guidance from the Hale Group, under the tutelage of Bob Ludwig, and with a tremendous amount of work by a huge team of industry members that was done. This group identified several specific areas that needed attention, including the quality and consistency of the product, efficiency and new methods of production, demand for our products and communication between sectors of the industry. To that end the Product Characteristics, Productivity, Demand Creation and Communications Committees were created. A fifth committee, the Implementation Committee was created to coordinate efforts of these four committees and to act as a reporting agency to the industry. Those committees have been working hard since the beginning and have contributed a vast amount of information to help improve each step from producer to consumer. Remember, the plan was not to create another organization in the industry. Rather it was to provide a vehicle to bring those organizations and individuals already involved together to focus on creating a greater demand for a better product and to make each segment of the industry profitable and sustainable.

As per the original plan, at the Roadmap meeting held at the Annual Convention in Scottsdale in January of 2016 the Hale Group handed the Roadmap guidance back to the industry. During that meeting it was decided that a new Implementation Committee would be formed to carry on the work of the Roadmap, as well as helping hold the respective committees accountable and responsible for their portion of the progress that the industry was seeking. The composition of the new Implementation Committee would include a member from ASI, one from ALB, one from NLFA, representatives from the packing segment, extension, production and from the youth of our industry. The members from ASI and NLFA would serve as vice-chairmen, while the ALB member would serve as chair. Megan Wortman from ALB would keep minutes and arrange monthly conference calls.

Since ASI's Let's Grow program was funding and involved in much of the work being done by the Productivity Committee it was determined that that function would be folded into the Let's Grow program. ALB was funding research at Colorado State and Ohio State on product flavor and sensory evaluation of lamb, so the Product Characteristics Committee was given to them. Likewise, ALB is continually working on ways to improve the demand for American lamb, so the Demand Creation Committee was absorbed by that organization. Finally, the Communications Committee was left with the Roadmap Implementation Committee because that was a group that was already formed including members from across the industry and was needed to develop priorities for further work.

The efforts of the Let's Grow program is updated regularly in the Sheep Industry News and a large percentage of the producers have benefited by the grants that have been given to organizations throughout our industry. This has made information available through workshops, webinars, seminars and countless other programs to traditional producers, direct marketers, seedstock producers and small producers alike. Unfortunately, this program will not go on forever, so it is important that you take advantage of this program when you can.

The American Lamb Board is working to create more demand for American Lamb through gaining a better understanding of our millennial and ethnic consumers. ALB is working closely with Dr. Richard Ehrhardt at Michigan State on a program to better understand how to market to several ethnic groups. ALB held their summer board meeting in Detroit to develop a working relationship with producers, processors and retailers that market to that Muslim/Islamic community. The Demand Creation Committee is developing strategies to better market mutton. In addition, ALB devotes 70% of the annual budget to American lamb promotion. It is providing partial funding for a NSIP staff position and is fully funding the research previously mentioned on flavor and sensory evaluation of lamb. At the core of the Product Characteristic Committee charge for 2016 is the flavor and sensory evaluation research that is nearing completion.

The first assignment of the new Implementation Committee was to come back from each segment of the industry with priorities of things that had not been previously considered by any of the Roadmap committees.

The cost of fat to the lamb industry was a topic that many thought needed to be determined, so those involved could make informed decisions about ways to reduce this cost. ALB is currently funding a study to determine the cost of fat to the lamb industry.

The seasonality of production was another of the problems identified that result in large backlogs of lambs annually. Members of the Implementation Committee discussed areas of the country and types of production systems that could stretch their production cycle to even out the flow of lambs throughout the year. Changes in the production systems in Texas during restocking after the drought were reported. A shift to hair sheep which are typically direct marketed and do not go through the feedlot system has spread production cycles over much of the year there and essentially decreased the seasonality of production in that state. Members of the committee are currently looking at production in their region of the country to determine if stretching the production calendar is feasible. Each segment of the industry is considering ways to incentivize the needed changes to make this possible while maintaining profitability. The feeding industry is working on changing ration formulation and ingredients to spread the periods of marketing while reducing fat in the product.

The fact that ungraded sheep carcasses do not have the same specifications that graded sheep carcasses do was another issue that was brought back to the Implementation Committee as a priority to address. This is not a new topic, but one that the committee agreed to take another look at. A subcommittee was created including a meat scientist, a person representing producers, a packer and a lamb feeder. This subcommittee has reviewed the two white papers that were prepared during the last time this topic was addressed and each member of the committee had an opportunity to present the pros and cons of making changes. The subcommittee is on hold at this time awaiting the results of the flavor and sensory evaluation research previously mentioned. A workshop is planned in October to learn the results of the research to have a more current and better understanding of the effects of several production factors on consumer eating satisfaction before the committee can make any decisions.

So, for those of you who are wondering what is going on with the Sheep Industry Roadmap, the plan is working as designed. Our sheep industry is taking control of its own destiny and the Roadmap is providing a forum for discussion and there are countless industry members out there working very hard to make needed changes. If you have specific issues you would like the Implementation Committee to consider, feel free to forward those along with potential solutions to the committee via email to Megan@Americanlamb.com