Using your skills as a herd management consultant: A veterinarian’s role beyond the blocked pygmy goat

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Abstract

In small ruminant practice, individual animal care can be a large part of a veterinarian's workload. Backyard pet owners use a veterinarian without avail for every hint of bloat, diarrhea, flaky skin, or possible dystocia. Large producers and high-value purebred herds of goats and sheep also have a need for veterinary service. These producers do not demand individual animal care, and often they claim that they know more about their animals than the veterinarian. Although this is often a misconception, there are many cases where we fail to provide what the producer wants. Here is the opportunity waiting to be grasped.

Key words: goats, small ruminant, veterinary, herd health

Résumé

Dans la pratique des petits ruminants, le soin individuel des animaux peut représenter une grande partie de la charge de travail des vétérinaires. Les propriétaires d’animaux domestiques d’arrière-cour font appel aux vétérinaires lorsqu’il y a le moindre indice de ballonnement, de diarrhée, de peau squameuse ou de dystocie potentielle. Les plus grands producteurs et les troupeaux pur-sang de chèvres et de moutons de grande valeur ont aussi besoin des services rendus par les vétérinaires. Ces producteurs ne demandent pas de soins individuels et déclament souvent en connaitre plus sur leurs animaux que les vétérinaires. Bien que cette perception soit souvent erronée, il arrive que nous ne donnions pas ce que le producteur attend. Voici donc une chance qui s’offre à nous.

Introduction

Although individual animal care is an essential part of every veterinarian’s practice, the need for overall large-scale management assistance is also important. The goat industry is undergoing a tremendous demand for growth as most dairy and meat marketing avenues are expanding. Creameries want more milk. The boutique creamery industry is growing rapidly. Goat meat is the number 1 meat consumed internationally. Consumers want a connection with their food. Small ruminants fit this model well. Veterinarians can play a major role in these operations in maintaining healthy, disease-free animals. Often times these herds and flocks have a high level of public interfacing, either through the internet or farm tours. Producers are looking for assistance in making these herds ‘public friendly’. On a larger scale, the goat dairy and meat industries continue to grow and develop. The demand for individual animal care is not nearly as great as the opportunity to make these producers more profitable and sustainable.

Providing Herd Management Services

In any advisory situation, the most important aspect is understanding the needs and wants of the advisee. To insert yourself into a role as a management consultant, the producer needs to feel you know more about managing certain aspects of their operation than they do. I am not implying that you show up and pontificate about everything you know about sheep or goats. Recognizing what is happening on the farm currently and then organizing a plan for the dairy, its employees, and the bank account is where the assistance is valuable. Finding the bottlenecks in the operation and creating a plan to improve production and efficiency are management opportunities.

We will go over some herd scenarios to provide examples of an organized approach to herd health management. Herd number 1: You are called out to assist with parasite issues at a grazing goat dairy. Two goats had been sent to necropsy with a diagnosis of lungworms and Haemonchus contortus. When assessing the overall herd health, it was noted that there were feeding issues, housing issues, and there were not enough kids present for the number of does. First, the parasite issue has to be resolved since this is what the producer called for. It is their 'most important' issue and should be addressed first. A plan is made to rotationally graze the milkers and deworm only the clinically affected milkers at that time. At dry-off, all does would be dewormed. This plan required management of goat flow changes; including cross fencing, planning flow from pasture to pasture, and creating a calendar that would be followed and monitored. During this meeting, the other issues were brought up: goats were locked in a barn at night with inadequate ventilation; feed trough space was limited in the barn, which was limiting milk production since
Another place a veterinarian can easily insert him or herself is in reproductive management. As dairy or beef cattle vets, the bulk of us already know how to manage herd reproduction and related issues. This is an area that is very underdeveloped in small ruminant practice. Ultrasound pregnancy checking exams, with follow-up planning of seasonal breeding schemes and abortion management, are key areas for veterinary assistance. It is very easy to cross over the knowledge that cattle vets have perfected into small ruminants. Seasonal breeding is the biggest challenge, and day-length regulation via lights or hormonal manipulation with CIDRs are both options, although CIDRs are only approved for use in sheep in the US. Abortion management in small ruminants can be a real challenge, and every visit to an operation during breeding or kidding/lambing season should include inquiries about abortions. In most herds, you should expect to find Q Fever, chlamydia, and toxoplasma abortions. The incidence of the abortions may vary, but you should always be looking for signs of abortions since they are such a common problem on goat operations. Poor management of breeding, bucks, and kidding/lambing areas supports high abortion rates. The skills we use as cattle veterinarians can all cross over in this instance. Examples include semen testing of rams and bucks to assess breeding ability and possible infections, rotation of breeding sires throughout the breeding season, proper ratio of eligible females: males, isolation and treatment of aborted females with removal and disposal of aborted fetuses, and some type of isolation, like a kidding pen during parturition, to prevent spread of infectious organisms.

Conclusions

No matter what type of assistance you are providing your clients, the term "consultant" implies someone with a thorough understanding of how animals move through a system, rather than just addressing and fixing a problem. A management consultant is solution-oriented, while as veterinarians we are trained to be problem-oriented. By modifying your approach to a veterinary call, you will be able to solve the problem while addressing the immediate concerns of a sick animal or disease outbreak. Veterinarians have the advantage as consultants of being able to perform both immediate veterinary care and accurate diagnosis of disease, while also setting up a plan for future disease eradication. Effective management programs all have a goal of healthy, productive animals. Managing disease and preventing loss will ultimately increase production and profitability. Using these skills can improve the quality of your practice and that of your producers.