

New Trends In Small Ruminant Parasite Control

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I recently had the privilege to listen to a talk given by Dr. Susan Kerr who is the WSU –Klickitat Co. Extension Director. Her presentation was entitled “New Trends In Small Ruminant Parasite Control”. Here is a synopsis of the information that she gave.

I know that all of you out there have parasite control practices that you have either developed with the help of your local veterinarian or with information gathered from publications and other farmers. We have been told to rotate wormers so that the parasites don't develop a resistance to any one medication. Some of us take fecal samples to our vets for analysis and then receive the recommendation for the proper dewormer to use. Most times we worm the whole herd at the same time. One goat needs worming then they all need it, right? Medicating your herd in the fall and the spring has been a common recommendation. As with many current practices in animal husbandry, the recommendations have changed and have a very practical and economic tune to them as far as my ears have heard.

Pasture management still is on top for parasite management and we have addressed this over the past year. Rotating pastures rather than letting your animals range over all of your acreage is recommended. Cross fencing with permanent or moveable barriers leaving 3-6 weeks between rotations will help to achieve this goal. Maintain pasture areas with forage height above 3 inches and avoiding overgrazing. Multi species grazing helps break the cycles of the parasites that love our goats. Avoiding wet pasture areas and keeping the goats off of dew-covered forage is recommended. Harrowing pastures to distribute manure that is there and not putting your barn cleanings on pastures will decrease reinfestation. I know that many of you who have small amounts of acreage, no irrigation potential and minimal farming apparatus are feeling a little discouraged at this point. Please read on.

The south eastern portion of the United States is in a bit of a pickle as they have reached the breaking point in controlling ‘Haemonchus Contortus’. This is a type of parasite known as the ‘barber pole worm’. This parasite loves warm and wet climates. As a result it is a huge problem in the sub tropics of the USA. They have been extensively using dewormers to control this devastating little bugger and now find themselves with growing resistance to any dewormers that are currently on the market. Since goat deworming is not high on the priority list for researchers, there are no new remedies coming. Pasture management is one of the few options that they have. The other option is for them to monitor their herd on an individual goat basis and to cull those animals that are more prone to infestation. It is not prevalent in the western states but as global warming occurs, our wetter areas such as the Willamette Valley may find itself in a similar situation. Breeding stock is in demand from other areas bringing this particular parasite into our area.

How is this management accomplished? Rule number one is to observe your herd closely on a day to day basis. Being able to identify those individual goats that are a little ‘off’ is a priority. Maybe they are lagging behind the herd when they come in to feed. Perhaps they come in to feed but are satisfied earlier than the rest and go off to bed down. Not as thrifty looking. Fur is a little more fluffed than others or drier looking. They seem to spend a bit more time scratching on the fence line. They might be the ones that develop foot rot or other maladies more easily than the rest of your herd. The barber pole parasite is known to attack the lining of our goats intestinal system causing nutritional and blood losses. This results in anemia and a weakened immune system. The other parasites that are prevalent in our area at this time take a similar toll on our animals. By identifying these individuals, you are able to make decisions based on your own herd as to how to deal with the problem. Culling is probably the most permanent option but sometimes these animals are the best looking of your breeding program and you want to keep the ‘good genes’ that they bring.

Your other option as you identify those individual goats that just aren't thriving is to do fecal samples. The most expensive way to do this is to collect samples and take them to your veterinarian for testing. The less expensive option is to purchase a microscope and supplies to do your own analysis. Some farmers are already doing this so there are opportunities to learn this technique. Area coordinators should be looking to their local extension services for resources to teach these skills to their membership. This is certainly going to be my recommendation at my own area meeting today. An appropriate microscope can be purchased on line. Often times they are being sold by school districts. Forming farmer alliances to share equipment can save money and pool knowledge.

What was most interesting to me in listening to Dr. Kerr was that a positive fecal sample does not necessarily mean that you need to treat! Establishing a tolerable level of parasite load in your animals would be the goal. We know that parasite levels tend to be high in our does in late pregnancy and also during the time that they are nursing their kids. The past recommendation was to medicate them frequently during these times. The current thought is to do more frequent fecal counts to monitor whether the doe's own immune system is dealing with the parasites or whether we need to intervene and then possibly cull her once her kids are weaned. Record keeping would allow us to follow her offspring to see if they also exhibit a less than desirable immune system so that we can continue to cull out this weakness. This also is important in your young and rapidly growing kids. Effective monitoring and judicious use of medications will increase their ability to reach market weight or breeding maturity efficiently.

All in all, with a little output of cash for equipment and access to education in the use of a microscope and doing fecal counts, we could actually have an end point of less money spent on expensive wormers that may actually be compounding our problem. A very valuable off shoot of this would also be the grand possibility of producing organic or very close to organic livestock, which is more highly valued in the marketplace. I for one, would much rather be looking at nannyberries under a microscope than wrestling goats to administer dewormers!

One last point. We have been educated in the past to use double and sometimes triple doses of dewormers in our goats. This has been instrumental in creating resistance! It is important to stick to label dosages, administer it in a way that the whole dose is given and to use these medications, really, as a last resort rather than a routine. As always, use of off label medications is unlawful, can cost you a large fine if your animals are tested at slaughter and found to have these medications in their systems and can be a health hazard when consumed by humans. Many of us eat our own meat. These chemicals can actually create long term health problems if consumed. I have scaled back doses in my own herd and have found that the recommended dose is just as effective and has saved me money in the long run.

As I said, this is just a short version of the lecture that Dr. Kerr gave. There will be learning opportunities in the future in this much more sensible approach to keeping our herds healthy. A huge THANK YOU to Susan and all of the researchers that are helping us in being better goat farmers!