

Sheep production workshop proves popular

More than 75 people, aged 5 to 80, attended the first annual Fundamentals of Sheep Production Workshop on March 29 at the Frederick Fairgrounds. The event was sponsored by the Maryland Sheep Breeders Association, in partnership with the University of Maryland Extension, Frederick County Sheep Breeders Association, and The Great Frederick Fair.

Attendees received a well-rounded introduction to sheep production through a series of informative presentations. Dr. Amanda Grev, Forage Extension Specialist, discussed fencing options, feeders and waterers, shelter needs, and basic handling systems. Jeff Semler, Washington County Extension Educator, shared a variety of educational and financial resources, providing guidance on where producers can turn for support.

Dr. Brittany Fletcher, Ruminant Livestock Extension Specialist, presented on nutritional management for all stages of sheep production—covering the needs of ewes, lambs, and rams—and highlighted key health practices to maintain a healthy flock.

The final portion of the workshop split into two sessions. Adults participated in a producer

panel where they engaged with experienced sheep producers representing various systems, including solar grazing, hair sheep, large flocks, dairy, wool, and club lambs. Youth participants joined a hands-on session led by Bobbye Schmidt, Carroll County 4-H Sheep Superintendent, where they learned about equipment and show box preparation. Each youth received a rope halter, generously donated by Sheepman's Supply. Participants enjoyed a delicious lamb luncheon prepared by Mike and Colleen Histon.

The event also featured opportunities for participants to take home valuable information and resources. Inside the workshop space, tables hosted by University of Maryland Extension and the Maryland Sheep Breeders Association were stocked with handouts, newsletters, and educational materials. Outside, the Maryland Department of Agriculture showcased its new interactive Animal Health Program trailer, offering hands-on learning and outreach on animal health initiatives.

This workshop marks the beginning of an ongoing series. Future events will feature more hands-on activities and address topics such as handling and animal husbandry, parasite and health management (including FAMACHA training and certification), pasture management, reproduction, lamb/kid school, wool, meat, and milk production, as well as farm management and marketing. The long-term goal is to offer a well-rounded education in all aspects of small ruminant production over a multi-year series.

—Brittany Fletcher

Swelling buds, resting ewes, and dawn. [Image by Martha Polkey]

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President's Message

Steve Breeding
is President of MSBA

*A spring
bursting with
wool and
wonder*

Spring has sprung, and with it, a whirlwind of activity that embodies the heart and soul of our association. As I write this, the bleating of newborn lambs fills the air, a symphony of new life that signals the culmination of months of careful planning and hard work. Lambing season, as always, has kept us all incredibly busy. This time of year, synonymous with late-night checks and vigilance over the health and well-being of our ewes and their offspring, is a testament to the dedication and resilience of Maryland's sheep farmers. The long hours are a small price to pay for the joy of witnessing new life and the promise of a bountiful season.

Beyond the farm, the Maryland Sheep Breeders Association has been buzzing with activity. We recently wrapped up another successful Maryland Sheep Shearing School. It's always a highlight of our spring, seeing both seasoned shearers and eager newcomers honing their skills. The dedication of our instructors and the enthusiasm of the participants were truly inspiring. This school is vital, not only for maintaining the quality of our fleeces but also for preserving the traditional skills that are central to our heritage. Seeing the next generation embrace this craft fills me with optimism for the future of our industry.

*Vendors and products
displays at the April 7
Frederick Farmers Market.
See story on page 12.*



I had the distinct honor of representing Maryland sheep producers at the American Sheep Industry (ASI) Fly-In in Washington, D.C., in March. This crucial event allowed us to advocate for the needs of our industry on a national level. We engaged with policymakers, highlighting the importance of supporting domestic wool and lamb production, addressing challenges related to predator control, and ensuring fair trade practices. It's vital that our voices are heard in the halls of power, and I'm proud to have played a role in amplifying the concerns and aspirations of Maryland's sheep farmers.

The fifth annual Maryland Shepherd's Market took place April 5 (see story on page 14). This event is a cornerstone of our community, a vibrant celebration of all things sheep. It provides a platform for our members to showcase their diverse products, from fine wool and handcrafted goods to delicious lamb and fiber arts. It's a wonderful opportunity to connect with fellow breeders, share knowledge, and engage with the public, educating them about the vital role sheep play in our state's agricultural landscape. We encourage everyone to come out and support our local shepherds and experience the unique charm of this market.

Furthermore, we are excited to see the ongoing success of the Maryland Extension Small Ruminant Fundamentals of Sheep Production program. This initiative, a collaboration between MSBA, the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, the Frederick County Sheep Breeders Association, and The Great Frederick Fair, is invaluable for both new and experienced shepherds. (This program took place on March 29 at the Frederick Fairgrounds; see story on page 1.) The program provides essential knowledge on all aspects of sheep management, from breeding and nutrition to health and marketing. By equipping our members with the latest research and best practices, we are ensuring the sustainability and prosperity of our industry for generations to come.

As we navigate the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of this busy spring, I am reminded of the strength and unity of our community. The Maryland Sheep Breeders Association is more than just an organization; it's a family, a network of passionate individuals who share a deep love for sheep and a commitment to preserving our agricultural heritage. Let us continue to support each other, share our knowledge, and work together to ensure a bright future for Maryland's sheep industry.

Thank you for your dedication, and I look forward to seeing you at our upcoming events.

Sheep and lamb inventory in the United States on January 1 totaled 5.05 million head, up slightly from January 1, 2024.

Breeding sheep inventory at 3.68 million head on January 1 increased slightly from 3.67 million on January 1, 2024. Ewes one year and older, at 2.88 million head, were slightly above last year. Market sheep and lambs on January 1 totaled 1.37 million head, up 1% from the last report. Market lambs comprised 94% of the total market inventory. Market sheep comprised the remaining 6 percent of total market inventory.

The 2024 lamb crop of 3.04 million head was up slightly from 2023. The 2024 lambing rate was 106 lambs per 100 ewes one year old and older on January 1, 2024, up 3% from 2023.

Shorn wool production in the United States during 2024 was 22.5 million pounds, down 1%



from 2023. Sheep and lambs shorn totaled 3.17 million head, down 2% from 2023. The average price paid for wool sold in 2024 was \$1.43 per pound for a total value of \$32.1 million, down 9% from \$35.4 million in 2023. As of January 1, 27% of the total sheep and lambs were hair sheep or wool-hair crosses.

Sheep death loss during 2024 totaled 200,000 head, unchanged from 2023. Lamb death loss increased 1% from 365,000 to 370,000 head.

Some statistics: U.S. sheep inventory

Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

The annual American Sheep Industry Fly-In to Washington, D.C., took place March 23-26.

Fifty sheep producers met with various agencies as well as meeting with more than 100 Senators and Congressmen and women during this trip to bring the ASI priorities to the table.

The main focus this year was the Farm Bill and tariffs. The Farm Bill is critical for farmers and ranchers continued ability to do business. ASI's position is that increased tariffs will play a huge role in leveling the playing field for our producers to be able to sell our lamb at prices we deserve. Being undercut by imported lamb is not sustainable, especially when the price of raising them keeps going up.

Members of the ASI Officers Committee met with a number of staff members.

• From the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative:

Joan Hurst, Deputy Assistant Representative, Agricultural Affairs and Commodity Policy

Sarah Fasano, Director of Agricultural Affairs, Agricultural Affairs and Commodity Policy

Sarah Morningred, Trade Policy Research Coordinator, Ag Affairs and Commodity Policy

• House Ag Committee

Majority staff (Thompson) staffers Justina Graff and Justin Benavidez

• Senate Agriculture Committee Majority staff (Boozman) staffers Trey Forsyth and Bryce McWilliams

• Senate Agriculture Committee Minority staff (Klobuchar) staffers Kyle Varner and Allie Lock

Maryland's Congressional representatives have not been very receptive to in-person meetings since Covid; I will continue to try to connect.

Steve Breeding was able to meet with staff in Delaware legislators' offices, which is important, as Delaware does not have a state association and does not officially have membership in ASI.

State reps push ASI priorities on Capitol Hill

Patty Sanville

is ASI Region II representative

ASI lobbying positions summary

Among ASI's positions, which state ASI members were to present to legislators in March on Capitol Hill, are these:

• **support for tariffs** on lamb imports from Australia and New Zealand

• **opposition to cutting any funding for existing programs benefiting the sheep industry** including Wildlife Services, marketing and production grants, research, disease prevention, and agricultural product export programs

• requests for **increases in funding** for programs such as the Wool Marketing Assistance Loan rate, Wildlife Services, U.S. Sheep Experiment Station, Bighorn Sheep in domestic sheep allotments, and scrapie eradication

• bolstering the **H2-A Temporary Agricultural Worker Program** and retaining the "special procedures" to "give our members a fighting chance to compete in an increasingly difficult financial environment," reducing filing fees,

modernizing petition filing processes, and opposing the minimum wages granted to such workers, asserting that they are "artificially escalated"

• support for the reintroduction of H.R. 1437, the Black Vulture Relief Act of 2023, which would **allow livestock producers and their employees to take black vultures without a permit**, in order to prevent death, injury, or destruction to livestock, and for other purposes

• requests a study by the General Accountability Office (GAO) to **evaluate**

the effectiveness of The Minor Use and Minor Species Animal Health Act of 2004

• supports **repeal of the estate tax**, through reintroduction of H.R. 7035, the "Death Tax Repeal Act"

• **retain the American Lamb Checkoff**

For a full list of this year's priorities please visit this ASI [webpage](#).





CONVENTION PRESENTATIONS

ASI eager for solar grazing

Martha Polkey

is editor of Maryland Sheep News

One discussion by ASI regional directors and industry partners presented the expansion of solar photovoltaic facilities as a growth opportunity for the sheep industry. Panel members included ASI Regions 3, 4, and 8 directors, representing upper Midwestern and Western states.

The presentation included graphs showing a vast forecasted expansion of photovoltaic facilities on agricultural acreage, with 258,000 acres of solar panels per year through 2029 (see graphic below).

The presentation asserted that multiple use of the land base could

- increase the tax base,
- increase cash rent and grazing value
- increase jobs and promote clean electricity generation.

The drivers of increased demand for power, presenters stated, were artificial intelligence (AI), data centers, and crypto mining. Noted was that AI Google searches take more than seven times the power that non-AI searches require.

Presuming that the increase in agrivoltaics would expand the sheep industry, the presenters listed expected increased needs for:

- veterinarians
- feed companies, and dealers
- equipment and equipment suppliers
- Cooperative Extension agents and public research
- ewe lambs and rams
- shepherds
- lamb slaughter capacity.

ASI representatives articulated the association's role in educating ASI members about the

Sheep research scholarship offered

Applications are open for the American Sheep Industry Association's annual Sheep Heritage Foundation Scholarship. The deadline to apply is May 31 and the recipient will be announced in June or July.

The \$3,000 scholarship will be awarded to one graduate level (MS or Ph.D.) student who is attending school in the United States.

The scholarship was developed to drive advancement in the American sheep industry, through either wool or lamb research. Applicants must be a graduate student involved in sheep and/or wool research in such areas as animal science, agriculture economics or veterinary medicine with proof of graduate school acceptance. Applicants must also be a United States citizen, present two letters of reference and complete the application.

[Follow this link](#) for more information and to apply.

opportunities, working with industry partners, and lobbying for favorable legislation on these topics:

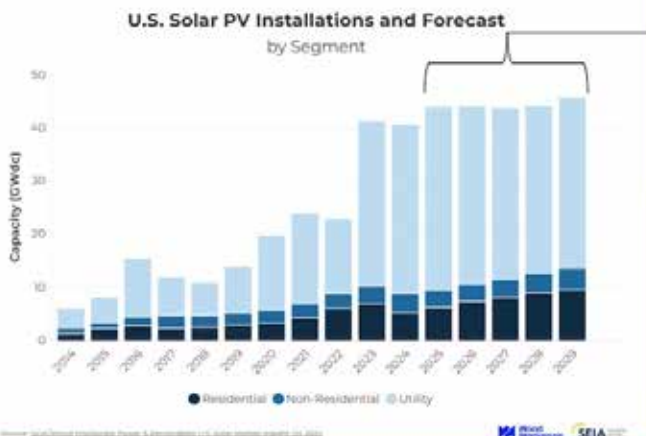
- property rights
- BLM conflicts
- Farm Bill language regarding "agrivoltaics"
- perhaps develop relationships with new legislative lobbying organizations.

ASI noted that it will continue meeting with the following organizations to partner on initiatives: the Solar Energy Industry Association, American Solar Grazing Association, National Grazing Lands Coalition, American Farm Land Trust, American Lamb Board, and the Solar & Farming Association.

In its presentation ASI also thanked two businesses, EDP Renewables North America LLC and Silicon Ranch, which donated \$5,000 and \$2,500, respectively, for convention sponsorships.

The 2025 ASI convention presentations are posted at [this link](#).

4. U.S. solar PV forecasts



258,000 Acres of Panels/year

Most of this land is grazable by sheep!!!!

Multi-use of the land base

- *Increase tax base, Increased cash rent, Grazing value, Increased jobs and Clean Electricity generation

Dr. Natalie Urie from APHIS shared some preliminary results of the 2024 National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) Sheep Study, which collected data on sheep operations in 30 states (Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and West Virginia were the mid-Atlantic states not selected for the 2024 study).

The Phase 1 crude response rate was 49.8 percent (2,461 farms out of 4,940 selected). For Phase 2 it was 62%. The final report will be sent to participating farms, comparing their operations to the others, and providing information on record keeping, visitor contact, veterinary use and antibiotic stewardship. Operations that participated in biological sampling will receive reports on enteric microbes, scrapie genotyping, GI parasites and anthelmintic resistance, and footrot pathogens.

Urie noted in January that the results shared are all unweighted data and data are still undergoing cleaning and validation, making it likely that results will change in the final reports.

Of reporting farms, 62.9% reported retirement, lack of a successor, or another personal/family situation for having no sheep in the next five years. 36% of farms made (permanent) additions of sheep; 77% reported permanent removals. Direct sale of lambs was a business for 23% of operations (also, 10% sold culls and 15% sold breeding stock directly).

Just 5.6% of operations reported using management software for record keeping; 13% used another electronic record-keeping method, a whopping 58.9% used handwritten notes, and 20.7% did not maintain records.

First bird flu diagnosis in sheep

The BBC reported on March 24 that for the first time a sheep has tested positive for the H5N1 virus.

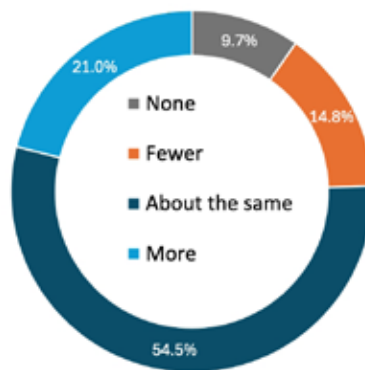
A British government spokesperson said the case was identified on a small farm in Yorkshire where bird flu had been confirmed in captive birds, and where sheep and poultry were being kept together.

The spokesperson said the single infected ewe, which had been showing signs of mastitis, had been "humanely culled" and no further cases among the flock were found. The ewe's lambs tested negative for the virus.

The National Sheep Association (NSA), which represents the views and interests of sheep producers in the UK, said mixing different animals was "questionable at the best of times, but should be avoided when England is undergoing a period of mandatory housing measures for poultry due to bird flu outbreaks."

APHIS recommends that sheep producers maintain separate water sources by species.

Inventory Expectations in the Next 5 Years



About 6,000 sheep on 353 operations submitted GI parasite samples. There was an average fecal egg count of 618 eggs/gram. Sheep at 30 operations tested positive for liver flukes.

Scrapie codon testing (4,305 sheep at 333 operations) showed that 38.8% of sheep were QR at codon 171, and 40.7% were RR. *Campylobacter* results for 4,153 tested sheep (209 operations) showed that 56% of farms had at least one positive result; 13% of sampled sheep were positive. Four *Campylobacter* species were found.

Salmonella positives were rarer; just 0.6% of (3,738) sheep sampled were positive (8% of farms).



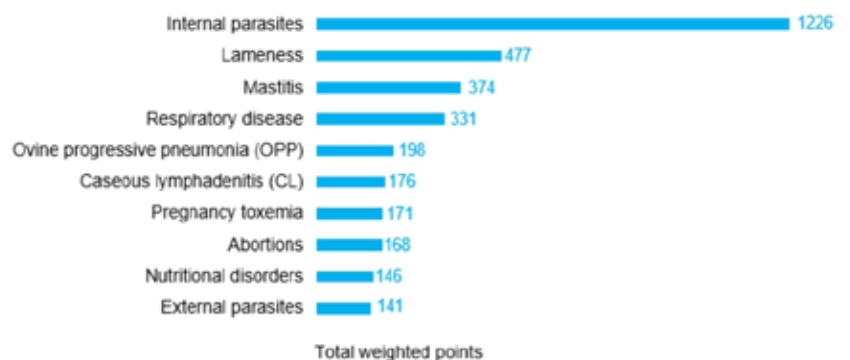
CONVENTION PRESENTATIONS

Preliminary results of sheep health study shared

Figure 1. Top 10 management priorities ranked by total weighted points



Figure 2. Top 10 disease, disorder, or pathogen priorities ranked by total weighted points



**New world
 screwworm
 moving
 north**

The United States officially eradicated the New World screwworm (*Cochliomyia hominivorax*) in 1982 using the sterile insect technique (whereby overwhelming numbers of sterile insects are released into the wild). An isolated outbreak occurred in the Florida Keys in 2016. The parasite had been eradicated in a number of Central American nations as well. APHIS has maintained a sterile fly breeding facility in Panama to create a barrier to prevent populations from moving north.

But in 2023, New World screwworm (NWS) detections in Panama exploded from an average of 25 cases per year to more than 6,500 cases in 1 year. Since then, screwworm has been detected in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Mexico, north of the biological barrier that has successfully contained this pest to South America for decades.

This parasitic fly is a species that is well known for the way in which its larvae (maggots) eat the living tissue of warm-blooded animals (including humans), such as in wounds (as small as a tick bite) and the navels of newborn animals. Hundreds of larvae hatch and burrow into the surrounding tissue as they feed. Should the wound be disturbed during this time, the larvae burrow or "screw" deeper into the flesh, hence the larva's common name. The maggots are capable of causing severe tissue damage or death if untreated. About three to seven days after hatching, the larvae fall to the ground to pupate. Pupae reach the adult stage about 7 days later.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is partnering with other USDA agencies, the U.S. Department of State, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United

**IDENTIFYING
 NEW WORLD
 SCREWORM!**
 (*Cochliomyia hominivorax*)



An animal health poster from Belize.

Nations, and affected countries to respond to this latest outbreak. APHIS is investing \$109.8 million to combat new NWS detections in Central America and Mexico to keep the pest from spreading into North America. With this funding, APHIS aims to eradicate NWS in Central America and Mexico and re-establish the biological barrier in the Darien Province.

The APHIS strategy to eradicate NWS in previously pest-free areas and re-establish the biological border in the Darien consists of:

- Breeding and releasing sterile insects
- Development and enforcement of animal movement controls
- Increasing passive and active surveillance, outreach, and education in impacted areas

APHIS maintains the only NWS pupae sterilization facility in North America. The facility is managed and funded jointly by USDA and Panama's Ministry of Agriculture Development. Located in Pacora, Panama, the facility produces, sterilizes, and releases NWS in the region. For maintenance of the biological barrier, the COPEG facility produces 20 million pupae with the capacity to increase to 100 million pupae per week during an outbreak, if required.

In February APHIS announced that it is shifting sterile fly dispersal efforts to Mexico—the northernmost point of the outbreak. APHIS remains committed to working closely with regional partners to support on-the-ground outbreak response activities, including surveillance, animal health outreach, and early detection efforts.

Animal disease preparedness update

At the January ASI convention a National Animal Disease Preparedness and Reporting Program (NADPRP) update was provided by Linda Detwiler, DVM, USDA APHIS Veterinary Services.

This program was established by Congress following the 2015 avian flu outbreak, after U.S. animal agriculture organizations and state departments of agriculture called for a comprehensive program that would fund projects to enhance animal disease prevention, early detection, and response capabilities. Funding is allocated for projects that address critical current needs to help prevent, prepare for, and respond to high-consequence emerging and foreign animal diseases.

Since FY2020, APHIS has provided over \$54 million to support more than 250 projects. Focus areas for this fiscal year are: training & exercises; biosecurity; depopulation, disposal, decontamination; state preparedness plans; animal movement decisions; outreach & education; animal disease traceability; and special topics such as aquatic, equine, sheep and goat vaccines.

Project proposals submitted for this fiscal year's funding numbered 134; awards are expected to be announced in May, with up to \$16.5 million allocated. Some recent projects have included evaluation of sheep and goat vaccine adjuvants, using RFID technology to monitor disease outbreaks, and studies of how to move sheep in the event of a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.

With the spread across the United States and Canada of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in deer and other cervids, the question of whether it could be transmitted to sheep has been the topic of USDA research by Dr. David Schneider at the Animal Disease Research Unit in Pullman, Washington.

Both scrapie and CWD are transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) that are infectious and neurodegenerative and for which there are no treatments. Like scrapie, CWD clinical disease often manifests as pruritus, ataxia, weight loss, tremors, changes in behavior, and eventually death.

APHIS research provides ID of CWD vs. scrapie

Scrapie was first diagnosed in the United States in 1947 following the import of an infected sheep.

By contrast, chronic wasting disease is a naturally occurring TSE of cervids (elk, deer and moose) which was first observed in 1967 in captive mule deer in several wildlife facilities in the United States. The first cases in free-ranging cervids were reported in 1981.

If sheep can acquire CWD through natural exposure, the implications for scrapie eradication could get complicated—and identifying which TSE had infected the animal becomes critical.

Schneider noted that as countries work diligently to eradicate scrapie in sheep and goats, it is important to develop tools that differentiate disease resulting from novel versus known sources of prions (the infectious particles that are believed to be the causative agent of TSEs) in an effort to identify TSE reservoirs that could lead to disease re-emergence, especially in regions where other TSEs naturally exist. A potentially novel source to small ruminants would be from natural exposure to CWD prions.

The maps at right show reported cases in 2000 (top), and current reported cases (bottom)—in 35 states and four Canadian provinces. Grey areas are cases among free-ranging animals; circles denote cases in farmed cervids.

Schneider's research, which involved experimental transmission of CWD prions in sheep via intracranial inoculation of brain material from CWD-infected elk, mule deer and white-tailed deer, showed that sheep are "experimentally" susceptible to CWD.

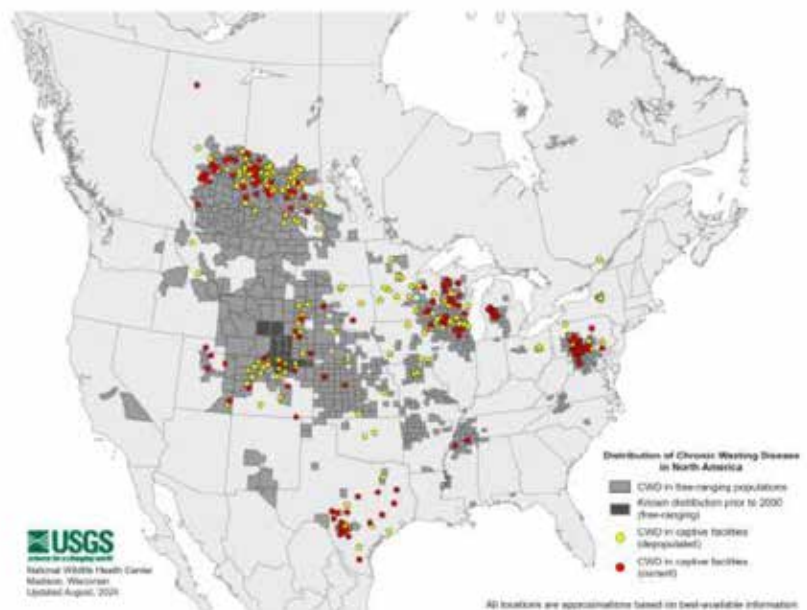
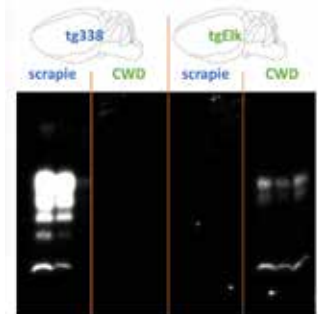
Next the researchers investigated whether CWD prions could be distinguished from scrapie prions in samples from infected animals. Studies in mice showed that bioassay methods could help

differentiate possible infection with CWD versus classical scrapie prions in sheep and goats. The research paper can be [accessed here](#).



CONVENTION PRESENTATIONS

A deer with CWD, and the different signatures of scrapie and CWD prions





PA shearing school April 24-26


Penn State Extension has scheduled a shearing school for April 24-26 in Scenery Hill. The workshop will start with a 45-minute webinar on April 24, followed by two days of in-person instruction and education.

“Join us for the Pennsylvania Sheep Shearing School, a blended workshop designed to help both beginners and experienced shearers build confidence and refine their skills,” reads the event webpage. “Gain hands-on experience and expert guidance as you learn professional shearing patterns, equipment setup, maintenance and repair, wool handling, and basic sheep care.”


The program begins with a virtual Zoom session on Thursday evening, followed by an in-person training on Friday. Participants may attend an optional second in-person day on Saturday for advanced instruction—all for one price.

Students are encouraged to watch a series of YouTube videos—link provided after registration—to prepare for the webinar. Insights from the videos will also be applied during the in-person workshop.


The cost to attend is \$100 per student; the registration deadline is April 21. [Follow this link](#) for more information.




Injectable



Pour-on



Feed



Drench

Formulation matters

SHEEP AND GOATS SHOULD BE DEWORMED ORALLY WITH DRENCH FORMULATIONS

- 1) Oral dewormers (drenches) were specifically formulated for sheep and goats.
- 2) Only oral dewormers are FDA-approved for sheep and goats.
- 3) Oral dewormers are usually more effective.
- 4) Oral dewormers are faster acting; they go directly into the digestive system.
- 5) Oral dewormers have shorter withdrawal periods.
(consider moxidectin for goats, 19-23 days for oral; 120-130 days for injectable)
- 6) Oral dewormers are safer (especially levamisole).
- 7) Dewormers approved for other species don't necessarily meet extra label drug requirements. Just because you can get it, doesn't mean it's legal.
- 8) Blocks, mineral mixes, and crumbles containing deworming ingredients should not be fed to sheep and goats. The exception is morantel tartrate (FDA-approved), and it should only be fed to individual goats that are eating well.
- 9) Injectable dewormers should not be used in sheep and goats; nor should injectable dewormers be squirted in their mouths.
- 10) Pour-on dewormers should not be used in sheep and goats; nor should pour-on dewormers be given orally.

BUT OTHER FORMULATIONS ARE CHEAPER AND EASIER . . . OR ARE THEY?

Some producers use injectables and pour-on formulations (often, orally) to deworm their sheep/goats because these products can be less expensive and easier to administer. But are they less expensive when they are less effective or when they accelerate the development of resistant worms? Are they less expensive if they cause death or result in illegal residues? The withdrawal periods for off-label drug use are often not known.

By Susan Schoenian, Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus, University of Maryland Extension.
Reviewed by Dr. Steve Hart, Langston University (retired). [2024]

You've probably all heard of pelletized wool by now: wool that's been shredded and run through a pelletizing machine, and used as a soil amendment/slow-release fertilizer. Does it really work? What are the benefits to sheep producers, agriculture/home gardeners? What are some of the challenges in developing markets for it, and in marketing it effectively?

Benefits to sheep producers

If you've heard of pelletized wool, you're probably aware of its benefits to sheep producers. Quite simply, it provides an easy means of converting otherwise unmarketable wool into a saleable product. If you primarily raise a wool breed for meat, and aren't selecting or managing for uniform fleece, you know that income from your wool clip (after shearing cost) is negligible.

If you have your fleeces pelletized (current costs are \$4-\$4.50/lb), you might be able to sell them for up to \$13-\$27 per lb (based on a quick perusal of online prices). Even if you primarily market your fleeces to hand-spinners, you still end up with bellies and topknots, the occasional weak fleece, and skirtings. Labor on your part amounts to removing any large hard tags of manure conveying the wool to whoever is making the pellets for you, collecting them when done, packaging them up and selling them.

Unlike some other products that can be made from fleeces of suboptimal quality for hand-spinners (such as dryer balls and wool sponges, both of which seem to last virtually indefinitely), pelletized wool is consumable: your buyers will likely purchase it year after year.

Benefits to agriculture/horticulture

If you intend to market your pelletized wool, you need to understand and communicate what makes it useful as a soil amendment/fertilizer. Pelletized wool, mixed with soil, represents a growth medium constituent that can stabilize water retention and provide nitrogen and potassium (typically 9-0-2 to 9-0-4 nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium, or NPK) with trace amounts of other nutrients such as sulfur. Wool biodegrades slowly, so pelletized wool represents a "slow release" source of nutrients. This reduces the risk of nitrate leaching and runoff before it can be utilized by plants. As wool consists of 50% carbon by weight, amending soils with pelletized wool over time can increase soil porosity and increase the rate of plant growth. Pelletized wool can also lighten heavy clay soils.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of pelletized wool is its water-retentive capacity: pelletized wool can retain up to 30% (some claim 200%)



of its weight in water. In potted plants, pelletized wool increases water use efficiency by decreasing evaporation and increasing plant transpiration, helping houseplants survive the periods of neglect many of us inflict upon them with irregular watering. "Wilt" tests conducted on plants grown in 4" pots using traditional soil reveal that plants begin to wilt on days 1-2, and die on days 4-5, whereas plants grown in soil amended with wool don't begin to wilt until days 7-8, or die until day 14. Pelletized wool can, thus, help in conserving water.

You can view pelletized wool as an eco-friendly replacement for sphagnum/peat moss: wool is, of course, a renewable product, whereas sphagnum/peat moss is mined (most sold in the United States is produced in Canada) and takes thousands of years to form. Unlike peat, which releases carbon when mined, pelletized wool helps sequester carbon in soil. The British government, in fact, is currently phasing out the sale of peat/sphagnum moss for horticultural purposes, with a broader ban on all peat-based products for commercial growers by 2030.

Pelletized wool, pound for pound, provides more nitrogen than many other soil amendments—and nitrogen is often the nutrient needed the most by growing plants. Compost might contain 1-2% nitrogen, and poultry manure 4.5% nitrogen, while pelletized wool can contain between 9 and 14% nitrogen, according to Albert Wilde (Wild Valley Farms), who has pioneered U.S. production of pelletized wool and initiated studies of its benefits.

One of the most valuable horticultural crops, tomatoes, are a favorite for home gardeners. Wilde states that studies show using pelletized wool for growing tomatoes reduced the time required to go from seed to fruit from

Pelletized wool: adding value to 'waste wool'

Lynn Roberts

has served on the MSBA board and raises Perendale sheep at Lucky Lane Farm in White Hall

Tomato plants in growing medium with pelletized wool (left) and without (right). [Image from <https://krapelletco.com/blogs/news/do-wool-pellets-work-well-with-tomatoes>]



Marketing ▶ 76 days to only 38 days. Not only do plants bear fruit earlier, but he reports that fruit quality is also improved.

When I used pelletized wool on my tomato plants last year, I noticed that few if any tomatoes cracked all season long. As most home gardeners know, tomatoes crack as a result of irregular watering. Last summer's drought (with no significant rain from June until September) certainly was an effective test for the pellets; my tomato plants were watered once a week (at best).

Studies conducted by the University of Vermont Extension under the auspices of a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant revealed results in growing tomatoes that differed in a few respects. Although incorporating pelletized wool at the highest loading (1.36 kg per plot) increased yield of harvested tomatoes per plant by 86% compared to unamended soils, the quality characteristics of the resulting tomatoes did not appear to be affected by incorporation of pelletized wool. Specifically, the proportion of split or rotten fruit or fruit grade was unaffected. More studies are clearly needed.

Pelletized wool has benefits for the growth of other vegetables. Field trials conducted in 2019 by the University of Vermont Extension compared conventional fertilizers to pelletized wool on three farms growing broccoli in side-by-side 100-foot rows. Pelletized wool was hand broadcast (61-159 pounds per 100 feet, tilled to a 2-4-inch depth). There was little if any difference in broccoli yield on the heavy clay and clay loam soils tested, but there was a remarkable 3.2-fold increase in broccoli yield when pelletized wool was incorporated in sandy soil. The differences in yield between clayey versus sandy soils point to the water-retaining characteristics of wool as

a key difference. The water-retentive capacity of pelletized wool may remain a key selling point. University of Vermont researchers have concluded that pelletized wool represents a viable alternative fertilizer in growing organic vegetables.

Pelletized wool also shows promise in deterring pests. Wilde reports that pelletized wool deters slugs when applied to the surface of soils. Preliminary evidence reported by Wilde suggests pelletized wool may also have a protective effect against aphids, possibly by making plants healthier.

Challenges

One of the principal challenges in converting your "waste" wool to pelletized wool lies in finding someone to provide the requisite processing. The equipment (a shredder and a pelletizer) is not inexpensive: the fiber mill we currently use paid \$18,000 for their equipment in 2024. (We note that pelletizing services are a natural complement to small fiber mills, where additional skirtings and waste from processing yields pounds of otherwise undesirable fiber).

Facilities owning pelletizing equipment are currently in short supply, and the cost of shipping low-grade wool to distant processors is likely prohibitive. It is certainly advantageous to have a processor with the requisite equipment and expertise close at hand. Blue Mountain Fiber Mill near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, provided wool pelletizing services for \$3 per pound, but closed in 2024.

Another complication lies in licensing. Blue Mountain was able to license their pellets (which they blended with rabbit manure as a binder) in Pennsylvania, but were unable to secure licensing in Maryland before they closed.

Agricultural products sold as fertilizers or soil amendments must be registered with each state, with accurate labeling (e.g., weight, contents, NPK) required—and jurisdictions' rules vary. The Maryland Department of Agriculture requires testing of such products; there also are federal descriptions of the expected test results of pelletized wool, and varying test results would be a reason for a red-tape tangle for Blue Mountain, with its incorporation of rabbit manure.

If you plan to sell pelletized wool as a soil amendment, be aware of testing and labeling requirements for your state, as well as patents and copyrights on product names.

Left, a wool shredder; right, the wool pelletizer. [Images courtesy Belle Alto Farms & Fiber Mill]



In February of this year a new facility in Pennsylvania began to offer a wool pelletizing service: Belle Alto Farms and Fiber Mill, in Wernersville (<https://www.bellealtofarms.com/>), west of Reading. They will pelletize your wool for \$4/pound, with a 10-pound minimum.

If Belle Alto Farms and Fiber Mill is too distant to be practical, check in with the [Chesapeake Fibershed](#) (they will have an educational display at the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival). They are developing a fiber resource directory that will include facilities that can produce pelletized wool.

Marketing suggestions

Because of the cost of production, pelletized wool is most likely to appeal to home gardeners or individuals with houseplants. If you have a farm store or sell lamb at farmer's markets, pelletized wool could be an added product. Your clients are likely to appreciate the benefits if you explain them. Consider bringing a pair of potted tomato plants to your stand, one grown with, and one without, pelletized wool.

If you don't sell at a farm store or farmer's market, marketing pelletized wool may represent more of a challenge. I started this year by donating pelletized wool (from Belle Alto) to several Baltimore City Master Gardeners, who will be conducting some controlled studies using it on community gardens. If it proves useful, the Master Gardeners will be communicating their results to the gardeners with which they work, and will also feature the amendment in their vegetable gardening display at the Maryland State Fair. With luck, such actions will help the market

to grow. I have also reached out to a couple of Baltimore-area eco-friendly landscaping services, where (at present) I am offering pelletized wool at cost (it beats having skirtings accumulate in my basement!). Once demand grows, I hope to be able to offer them—either in bulk or in 1-lb packages—to local nurseries.

We shall see how the market develops as pelletized wool catches on, more pelletizing services spring up, and it becomes more widely available (and at wholesale prices). I recommend starting small—don't get hundreds of pounds made at a time unless you have a marketing plan.

If you want to see pelletized wool or try them out on your own potted plants or garden, several producers will have them at the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival. I (at Lucky Lane Farm) will have some on display as part of my Perendale sheep display in the Display of Breeds.

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Sample packaging for pelletized wool.

Marketing ▶

Martha Polkey

The sustained efforts of several Virginia sheep farmers to advance the prospects for a Virginia wool insulation plant have advanced with the receipt early this year of a nearly \$30,000 grant from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program.

The on-farm research grant, “Creating Sustainable Construction Opportunities Using Virginia Wool,” has as its principal investigator Associate Professor Daniel Hindman, and co-investigator Professor Tom Hammett, both with the Department of Sustainable Biomaterials at Virginia Tech. Another co-investigator is a Cooperative Extension animal specialist.

SARE Grant goes to Virginia wool insulation research

suitability for an insulation project, as well as an evaluation of supply and pricing.

“The local wool production must be large enough to consistently supply the demand of raw material needed. Payments to farmers for their wool would be commiserate with or potentially exceed the cost of shearing to offset this as a loss to the farm,” states the grant narrative. The investigators will visit farms in the state and survey producers about quantities of wool available.

Essential to the production of wool insulation is a scouring facility that can apply a borate substance to the cleaned wool, which is necessary to prevent insects, mold, and fungi. The investigators will study viable methods for this application, which would then be provided to the scouring facility.

Fibershed and its affiliates across the nation have articulated the need to create new products with underutilized wool, and the need for more scouring facilities to prepare the fiber for new end uses. This project aligns well with those goals.

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is a producer-driven, decentralized competitive grants and education program operating in every state and island protectorate. It is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Institute for Food and Agriculture.

An image of wool batt insulation from the Havelock Wool website. The company sources its wool from New Zealand.



Project cooperators are Daniel Banker, a sheep farmer who owns Whitegate Farms in Pearisburg, Virginia, is an architect at ZMM Architects and an engineer; and Cecil King, a sheep farmer who owns Colonial Farms in Pulaski, Virginia, and current president of the New River Valley Sheep and Goat Association.

The two-year study period will include evaluation of wool types grown in the state and their



A partnership between WVU Extension, the Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the College of Creative Arts and Media has been awarded a 3-year, \$200,000 grant to explore new market opportunities for agricultural products and create a profitable wool market.

WV grant to explore wool marketing needs

“Wool is being discarded as ‘waste wool’ due to the necessary infrastructure not being available and low national wholesale market value. By focusing on waste wool and value creation, this grant seeks to find value for the wool, so it is not thrown away or an expense for a farmer,” said WVU Extension Small Farm Center Program Coordinator Lisa Jones.

Due to the lack of local options, some farmers send their wool out of state to be processed, which can take several months, and farmers receive very little compensation in return, making it not worth the time or effort to ship it. This grant will identify infrastructure needed for processing and distribution, allowing farmers to profit from their

wool production in West Virginia by turning the processed wool into a retail item. The first phase of the grant will be to conduct a feasibility analysis and research the wool supply chain and its complexity.

“We are researching and taking a systems approach to understand the wool production system to integrate environmental, economic and social aspects to drive sustainable practices to enhance product quality and maximize efficiency,” said Jordon Masters, research assistant with the Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. “Research is being done to determine an appropriate price point for farmers’ return on investment, create new wool products and more to add value to the wool.”

During the outreach phase of the grant, WVU Extension agents will be heavily involved in training farmers, given their existing connections to the community. Other extension and Davis College faculty and staff also will train local farmers.

The University of Maryland is pleased to welcome Dr. Brittany Fletcher (née Lippy) as the new Ruminant Livestock Extension Specialist at the Western Maryland Research and Education Center, a role she began in September 2024.

A native of north central Maryland, Dr. Fletcher was raised on a small, diversified farm where her family raised sheep, cattle, and hogs. She was deeply involved in 4-H, competed in both



the Maryland and National Make It With Wool contests, and was an avid livestock judge.

Dr. Fletcher earned her bachelor's degree in Animal Science from Oklahoma State

University in 2019, where she conducted research on ionophores and implants in feedlot lambs. She continued her graduate studies at OSU,



receiving a master's degree in 2021 and her Ph.D. in 2024. Her research focused on trace mineral supplementation in feedlot cattle and the use of mixed-species grazing to manage woody plant encroachment in the Central Great Plains.

In her new role, Dr. Fletcher is eager to support Maryland's sheep, goat, beef cattle, and dairy producers. She plans to launch a multi-part workshop series tailored to each species, covering topics such as nutrition, health, management, marketing, and infrastructure. She also offers on-farm consultations to help producers troubleshoot and improve their operations.

For questions or to schedule a consultation, contact Dr. Fletcher at bfletch1@umd.edu or call 301-226-7576.

Fletcher is new livestock specialist



New and noteworthy for this year's Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival:

- Valais Blacknose is the featured breed, with special awards in various competitions including the Fleece Show and Sale, and a

2025 Festival highlights

Valais Sheep Show class Saturday afternoon.

- The Perendale breed now has a breed-specific class in the Fleece Show and Sale.

- Shepherds' Seminars include talks on grazing management, the ins and outs of collection of semen and embryos for import and export, the Wool Assurance Program, and "How Chefs Helped Our Lamb Business Succeed," with Suki and John Jamison.

- A Sunday lecture, "The History of Textiles" with Melissa Weaver Dunning, is a class with a \$5 fee.

- There are new entry hours for the Skein and Garment Competition, and new drop-off hours for the sheep management equipment and spinning and weaving equipment auctions, with online registration for bidders and consignors.

Patricia Sanville has been named the New Region II ASI director, replacing Lisa Weeks.

This Eastern region includes Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

She has served as the director from Maryland to the American Sheep Industry Association. Patricia is currently serving a three-year term on the National Sheep Industry Improvement Center Board of Directors.

Patricia is ag-education co-chair for The Great Frederick Fair, and also works closely with both



the 4-H and FFA programs in addition to the public and private schools in the area. Patricia is a trainer for ASI's Secure Sheep and Wool Supply Program, as well as an evaluator for ASI's American Wool Assurance Program.

Sanville is new regional ASI rep

Maryland News ▶ The 5th Annual Shepherds Farm Market took place on April 5 at the Frederick County Fairgrounds, and everyone had a great day. The weather was cool and damp; vendors arose an hour earlier than last year to arrive and set up in time for the 9 a.m. opening.

Fifth Farm Market showcases local products

Jennifer Smith

assisted with market promotion

Customers did not rise so early, but began appearing around 9:30 am and were eager to see the wide array of offerings. Shoppers chose from dye plant seedlings to home-made soaps, raw fleeces to beautifully colored yarn, craft beer to fuzzy, felted items, filling their bags with unique, locally made products. The star of the show may have been pelletized wool. Market goers were very interested in learning about this fairly new product, and excited to incorporate it into their gardening plans. Several customers were repeats, coming back for more unique, quality products from farmers they knew.

This event was not only a great place to buy locally-produced sheep farm products, but also provided a chance for inspiration and exchange of ideas. Many attendees wanted to talk about their own projects, and learn about new, creative opportunities. And the sharing was reciprocal. This venue provided an intimate space for community and connection among local residents, small business owners, and farmers alike. It was a special event, different from other more crowded and hectic fiber fests.

Drinkables, wearables, and adorables (!) were some of the many offerings of the market.

Many vendors believed the turnout increased from last year (for some, sales did too!) The Market was advertised more widely including ads



in the Frederick News Post, HoCoMoFreddie's Trading Post, the Chesapeake Fibershed website, the Homegrown Frederick website, Housewives of Frederick County Blog (by Pam Stultz) and of course, Facebook. Printed flyers were distributed to libraries, businesses, restaurants, as well as any other spot a flyer could be left.

The Shepherds Farm Market began 5 years ago as a venue for local shepherds to bring their products to market. Many sheep farms in Maryland are small, family businesses whose owners work other jobs. Raising healthy livestock or just tending to a few woolly pets takes skills that don't always involve sales and marketing expertise. This event fills that gap and enables all to reap the benefits of their hard work.



Maryland Sheep News is published three times a year by the Maryland Sheep Breeders Association, Inc., and is sent to MSBA members. See back page for membership application.

Ads and article submissions

Article ideas and submissions are welcome. If you have an event or topic you would like to see covered, or if you would like to write an article for an issue, please contact the editor.

The Maryland Shepherd accepts advertising; inquire for rates and sizes. Acceptable formats are PDFs, Word docs or jpegs.

Issue deadlines for ads and copy:

Spring, April 7
 Summer, June 30
 Fall/Winter, Oct. 30

Send inquiries/ads to :

Martha Polkey, Editor
 martha.polkey@icloud.com

Send payment to:

Treasurer, MSBA
 3038 Brightwell Drive
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Maryland Sheep Breeders Association, Inc.

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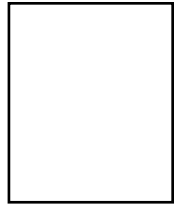
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Maryland Sheep Breeders Association:
marylandsheepbreeders.org

Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival:
sheepandwool.org

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Join *the*

MARYLAND SHEEP BREEDERS ASSOCIATION

...and become part of an active organization that sponsors the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival (the premier event of its kind in the nation), Sheep Shearing School, various youth activities, and a variety of educational functions.

You can join and pay online at <https://marylandsheepbreeders.org>, and fill out your member profile page. If you prefer to register by mail, fill out the form at left and mail with your \$25 check.

The Maryland Sheep Breeders Association Board of Directors meets every other month. Meetings are open to members. For minutes of meetings, contact the MSBA Secretary (see p. 15).

Here are sponsored events and activities for 2025

- January 24-26: Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival Winterfest
- February 14-15: Beginning Shearing School
- May 3-4: Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival
- TBD: Annual Meeting & Dinner.

As a member you will:

- Join an active and friendly community of shepherds and others
- Support the core activities of the MSBA.
- Receive the *Maryland Sheep News*, MSBA's informative newsletter, 3 times a year.
- Receive regular publications from the American Sheep Industry Association.
- Receive priority consideration for enrollment in the Maryland Shearing School (applicable only if you own sheep), and your family members will be given priority consideration for the annual MSBA scholarship.
- Receive free admission to the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival and be mailed a free copy of the catalog.
- Pay a reduced commission on all fleeces sold at the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival Fleece Show & Sale.
- Be able to promote your farm or business through a free profile page on the MSBA website.

Membership application

MARYLAND SHEEP BREEDERS ASSOCIATION

Name: _____

Farm Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Please include me in the MSBA Breeders Directory.

Web URL: _____

Breed(s): _____ No. Ewes: _____

Send form and \$25 check made payable to MSBA to Kate Warner, Membership Chair, 5241 South Mill Street, Lineboro, MD 21102. She will contact you for additional information for the breeders directory and online profile.

Annual membership/subscription fee: \$25. The membership year runs from October through September. Dues for membership received prior to June 1, 2025, will be accepted as paid through September 30, 2025. Dues received on or after June 1 will be accepted as paid through September 30, 2026.