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A Quick Guide to Identifying Sheep

Acknowledgements

US Department of Agriculture - Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

American Sheep Industry Association

Cindy Wolf, DVM, Co-Chair ASI Animal Health Committee

Livestock Marketing Association





The USDA National Scrapie Eradication Program requires that most sheep be identified to their flock of birth when they leave their home premises for sale, shows, events or are commingled with other sheep.

Most states also have requirements for scrapie identification. Your state or USDA-APHIS veterinarian can provide accurate information and alert you to state requirements you also need to meet. Call 1-866 USDA-TAG to order tags, request a flock ID and to learn about what types of tags are available.

Introduction

The responsibility for tagging sheep that leave your premises, whether going to a show, sale, or auction yard is yours. We understand that many auction markets will tag sheep that arrive unidentified, but they usually charge a fee to do so and would prefer producers to tag their sheep prior to arriving at their facility. Producers are encouraged to tag their sheep prior to departing their home premises.

Scrapie is a degenerative and eventually fatal disease affecting the central nervous systems of sheep and goats. Animals may appear uncoordinated and weak, become thin, be highly sensitive to noise and sudden movements, have tremors, press their heads against solid objects, stargaze and repeatedly rub, leading to bare spots – therefore the disease commonly became called “scrapie”.





“At one time, approximately 1 in 379 sheep in the US had Scrapie. By 2021, the last year that a scrapie positive sheep was found, that number was 1 in 50,000. After nearly 80 years, the US Sheep Industry, in partnership with USDA and the State animal health officials, has just about accomplished the job it set out to do: eradicate scrapie.”

**– Cindy Wolf, Veterinarian and Producer,
Co-Chair ASI Animal Health Committee.**

Tagging Sheep

Tagging sheep can be tiring and stressful for everyone, especially when working with hard-to-handle animals. Here are some suggestions to help reduce that stress and improve safety for employees and the animals.

- If the tagging is done in a pen, properly securing the animals is important as movement of the animal's head may cause injury to the handler or livestock, or result in improper tagging.
- The smaller the pen area the less likely a sheep can run away. Using the sides of the pen to help prevent animals from backing away or moving forward, and holding the sheep firmly but gently as you place the ear tag in the animal.
- It can be helpful to have a second person working with you when tagging, even if you're tagging smaller, lighter lambs, as they can be squirmy and difficult to hold, which can increase the likelihood of slipping or injury.

Tag Placement

Proper placement of the tag can mean a smoother tagging process, longer tag retention, and less stress on everyone.

Place the ear tag no more than 2 inches from the base of the sheep's ear. Tagging a sheep's ear too far away from the skull makes it more likely the sheep will get the tag caught on fencing and be ripped out.

Beware of the vein that runs down the center of the sheep's ear. Place the sheep ear tag either above or below the vein. Tags placed below the vein are easier to view.

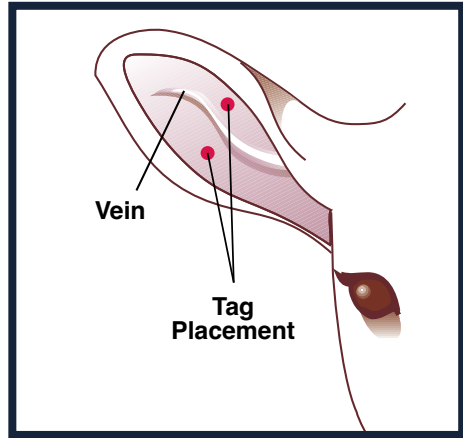


Image courtesy of Premier 1 Supplies

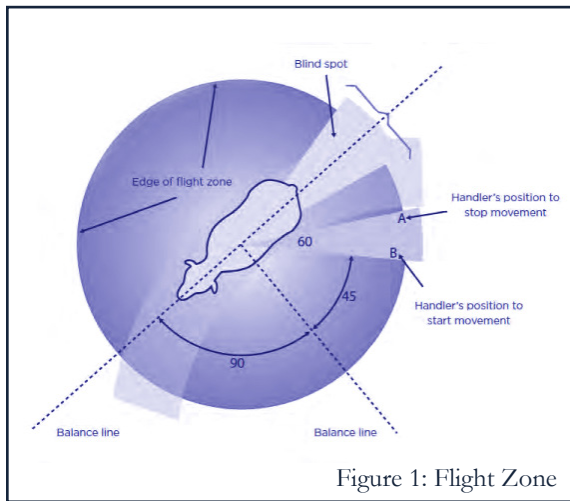
Tag applicators

Tag applicators, or “taggers” as they are known, are a necessary tool. A number of applicator options are available, especially for applying plastic USDA Scrapie ear tags. Metal ear tags are common at auction markets, although more plastic tags are also being used in that setting. To apply metal USDA Scrapie Ear tags, a 505s applicator is needed.

Tag applicators can cause hand fatigue, especially when applying tags to multiple animals. Pneumatic taggers that require much less force to squeeze when applying tags are available.



Tips on Handling and Moving Sheep



Sheep are naturally timid animals. Shouting, yelling, or clapping create fear and will make handling or moving sheep more difficult. All animals have “flight zones,” that is, the distance at which they will begin to move away from people. Range sheep, which rarely see humans, are likely to have a larger “flight zone” than sheep from small flocks or club lambs that may be more used to humans and not as difficult to handle.

Handling and Moving Sheep

Like most livestock, sheep don't like to move into the sun – they can't see where they are going and will be reluctant to move forward. If someone is hanging over a rail, or standing near the gate you want the sheep to move through, they will balk. Temple Grandin, known for her expertise in low stress handling of livestock, suggests getting down to the level of the sheep and seeing what they see, and identifying what might make them afraid to move forward.

Tip: one of the most successful and easiest tools to get sheep to move quickly through to the desired destination (or location) is to use a lead sheep. A lead sheep is usually a wether and is led ahead of the group of sheep needing to be moved. The other sheep will naturally follow the lead sheep. This trick is commonly used by producers, transporters and even sometimes processors.

Handling and Moving Sheep

Tip: Sheep with horns can present a difficult situation. While it is okay to hold a horn gently as leverage, try not to grab a sheep by the horns. The horn can break off or you can get hurt. Instead, cup one hand under the jaw and apply a small amount of pressure. The animal won't push forward into your hand but will instead back into you. You can use your hand or body to block the back and shoulders.



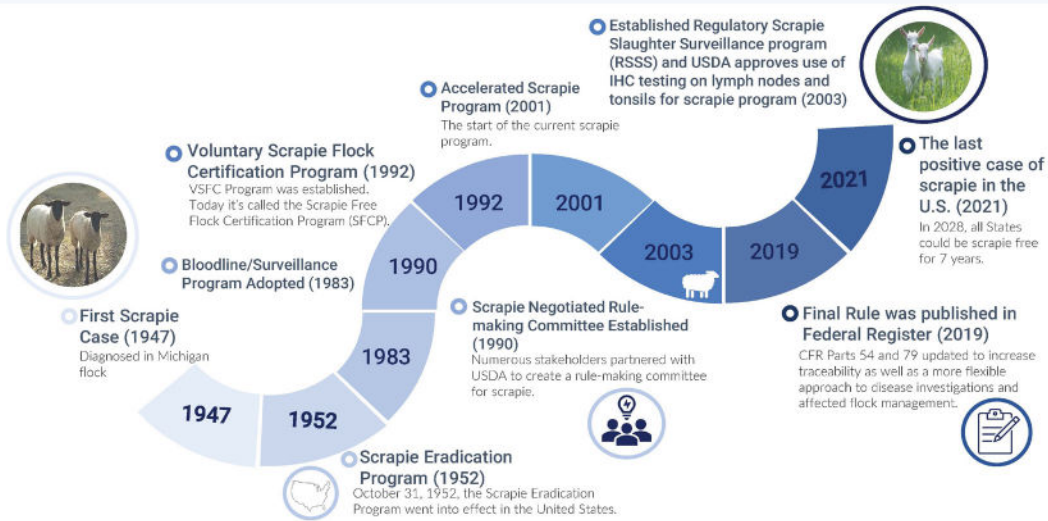
Conclusion

It is hoped that this small guidebook might help producers when tagging their animals and encourage them to tag their animals before leaving their home premises, in accordance with USDA regulations. In recent years livestock markets have experienced a marked increase in the number of sheep that arrive needing scrapie tags. While markets will often apply the scrapie tags, most, if not all, also charge fees to do so. Tagging sheep at home prior to departure may be a simple way to reduce market costs.

More info



Scrapie Program Advancements from 1947–Present





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