

News section

Small ruminants

Research project aims to ‘future-proof’ sheep and goat farming

RESEARCHERS at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) are taking part in a new EU-funded project that is aiming to future-proof the sheep and goat farming industry in Europe.

The project, iSAGE, has been awarded nearly £6 million from the EU's Horizon 2020 fund. A consortium of 33 research and industry partners from six European member states and Turkey are involved with the project, which is being coordinated by the School of Veterinary Medicine at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece. Other UK partners include the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the National Sheep Association and the Organic Research Centre. Five of the EU countries involved in the project – Greece, France, Italy, Spain and the UK – collectively account for 74 per cent of the European sheep population and 87 per cent of the goat population. The project will assess factors that could impact on the sheep and goat sector in the coming decades, such as climate change and consumer preferences. It will then develop tools to help producers adapt to the predicted changes.

The research team at SRUC will be focusing on creating practical breeding goals and tools for the sheep and goat sector in Britain and across Europe. Georgios Banos, of SRUC, explained that the only way to ensure the long-term sustainability of the sector was to look at what the future might bring and help farmers prepare for and adapt to the changes. ‘The project will look at how our climate and pastures might change, how consumer and farmer attitudes and preferences could develop and then design programmes which will ensure we can breed animals best suited to those conditions,’ he said.

He added: ‘Different countries and environments require different types of animals. If, for example, we do have more wet weather in the UK, we could see more parasites on our pastures which means grazing animals will need to have stronger resistance to diseases they carry. Elsewhere however, if animals are living in hot, dry conditions, they will need to be bred to cope with heat stress. Of course, we need to map consumer tastes and how they may change. If the trend for leaner meat continues, that will need to be incorporated, but we will also have to consider the nutritional value of the product, considering for example the appropriate fatty acid composition.’

The first year of the project will comprise two distinct phases. The first will assess the current position in terms of the sheep and goat farming sector across Europe, and the second will map potential changes in weather, pastures and the market. The SRUC team will then move on to analysing data from more than 2.5 million animals to identify the specific traits required for the ideal future sheep and goat breeds.

The project is set to run until 2020.



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