



Photo by Pat R. Ptolemy

Sheep producers from throughout Colorado gathered at the 78th annual convention to discuss important issues facing the sheep industry today, from the world sheep and wool market to rangeland monitoring and wildlife predators.

Australian rain may dampen wool market

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FRISCO, Colo. — Record high lamb prices while reason for celebration, may not last.

Ron Cole with the U. S. Department of Agriculture, updated members of the Colorado Wool Growers Association at their 78th annual convention.

Cole rejoiced with members about the current record high lamb market but cautioned that prices probably won't last. Packing houses are low in processing volume and pelts while recording record high overhead. Although prices for producers are high, there's a limit to how long the packers can sustain losses, so the

prices are sure to dip eventually.

There is feedlot capacity for 550,000 head but there are only 100,000 lambs currently in the feedlots, so producers "need to build supply while keeping quality up to maintain consumption," said Cole.

The world sheep and wool market is another factor that affects local growers. Australian sheep population has fallen to a record low of 99 million with their lamb prices at record highs. Their recent dry winter weather combined with two straight weeks of rain has Australian stockmen fearing wool rot that could affect the world wool market.

Though China sets the wool market with Australian wool,

they buy the raw product in U.S. dollars. So although some complain that the U.S. currency is devalued, if the Australian dollar takes a plunge, it could positively impact Colorado sheep producers.

Sheepmen have more to consider than simply raising lambs these days. The reintroduction of the lynx to the Colorado high country where producers graze their sheep in the summer can impact grazing rights.

Rick Kahn of the Department of Wildlife outlined the lynx reintroduction program since its inception in 1999 when 204 adult animals from Canada and Alaska were released. Currently, lynx dens

have been found in southwestern Colorado and in the mountains south of Independence Pass.

The 60 percent recruitment rate (number of animals that survive and become part of the breeding population) indicates a better survival rate than in the natural environments of Montana. Most of the discovered dens that are on very steep north facing slopes — too steep for even elk to graze — indicating little interference from sheep grazing. The den sites are kept secret, but the sheepmen who graze those allotments would like to know where the dens are in order to prevent conflict between female lynx with young and their guard dogs.

Tom Blickensderfer of the Department of Natural Resources explained that states have control of species reintroduction. The lynx in Colorado could become a DPS, Distinct Population Sector, and qualify for de-listing under the ESA or Endangered Species Act if recovery goals are ever met. However, those goals have not been set by the federal government agency.

Rangeland monitoring on BLM lands is a program to help ranchers assess the grazing on public lands. Ron Wenker, State Director of Colorado's BLM, explained that this voluntary program

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can help maximize forage without undue stress on the land. To date less than 12 percent of grazing lease holders have taken advantage of this cooperative effort, and he encouraged everyone to become involved.

Wenker acknowledged that ranchers are good stewards of the land, and when the drought devastated some areas, they voluntarily backed off grazing, so that no leases were revoked due to overgrazing.

He cautioned those ranchers with grazing leases in the habi-

tat of the Gunnison Sage Grouse that there is a potential for ESA listing of the birds. Wenker has recommended that the current population be adopted as a minimum standard to avoid listing.

Friday's keynote speaker, Charles E. Kay of Utah State University, talked about the effects that wolves and mountain lions and bears have on the sheepmen's livelihood. Bucking conventional popular wisdom that holds that these predators have no effect on deer, elk and moose populations, Kay enlightened the luncheon audience with studies from Arizona to Canada that predators do impact ungulate populations and that available forage is not the only factor in herd recruitment numbers.

Another fallacy Kay debunked was that lions and wolves live in peaceful co-existence within their species. If murder is defined as killing of one's own species, wolves have a 18,000 per 100,000 murder rate; while lions kill 12,000 of their own kind per 100,00 and humans murder 7 per 100,00 according to Kay's calculations.

Washington State professors, Dr. Hong Li and Dr. Subramaniam Srikumaran, discussed diseases that sheep carry with little or no adverse effects, but that can have fatal impact on bighorn sheep and bison. They are conducting research to isolate the specific pathogens of these diseases and studies to prove or disprove that some of the microbes that sheep carry can be the cause of deaths in these animals and the contact necessary for infection.

Although ranchers have raised sheep profitably in Colorado for many years, sheepmen still have more to learn in these changing times. More involvement by the ranchers whose livelihood is impacted by regulations from the local to the federal levels is required if Colorado is to remain as one of the top lamb and wool producing states.

For more information, visit www.coloradosheep.org.