

On-Farm Performance Testing for Meat Goats - Dr. Frank Pinkerton

Preface

As Goat Rancher readers know, I have long been a proponent of on-farm evaluation of goat herds. I have also noted that over the last 50 years or so the dairy cattle industry employed such an organized program, Dairy Herd Improvement, which was instrumental in identifying superior herds across the nation. Milk yield per cow per annum is the basic element in herd profitability, and identification of superior cows and sires was/is crucial to achieving and sustaining dairy enterprises. Of corollary assistance in making rapid improvement in milk yields/herd was the widespread adoption of artificial insemination programs featuring bulls with hundreds of production-tested daughters. Over the years, dairy goat producers have also participated in such endeavours to good effect, although not to the extent of dairy cow owners.

Introduction

The rationale for on-farm testing of a meat goat herd is to *quantify and document the relative productivity of the does in one's herd in order to distinguish between 'keepers and culls'*. Over time selection of such keeper animals should lead to increased productivity and thus to improved net income/doe and, one may logically expect, increased prices for any replacement stock sold. In short, such a program would seem to be a cost-beneficial management strategy, particularly for those intending to stay in the business.

However, the great majority of owners have elected not to do so as yet. Some breeders, large or small, purebred or commercial, may not *want* to know. Perhaps, they may simply prefer blissful ignorance to possible documented mediocrity—especially those merchandizing animals primarily on the basis of phenotype (looks), pedigree, and Show-ring accomplishments—no matter that these animals, or their progeny, are also thought by many commercial producers likely to be excellent herd-sire or super-dam prospects.

For admitted hobbyists and smaller operators, the need to do on-farm testing may well not be self-evident; for others, it may be considered as a time-consuming hassle not equal to the perceived benefits. Indeed, my experience is that, currently, most prospective buyers of replacement breeding stock very seldom ask for, much less demand, performance data for use in purchasing decisions. Rather, they proceed on 'looks', seller reputation, pedigree, Show results, pricing, whatever.

Contrarily, I contend that, as enterprise profitability is increasingly pressured by inflating input prices and sporadically limited by unfavourable market responses, producers wishing to stay afloat will eventually feel ‘forced’ to undertake a more rational selection program—or subsidize their operation until money or patience runs out. Indeed, for those buyers looking for ‘proven’ stock to more nearly ensure the economic success of their own enterprise, the need for documented on-farm performance records would seem (to me) to be self-evident. In short, when current producers perceive the economic need to ‘test’, they will do so—but not before, no matter the urging by well-meaning outsiders (like me).

Contrarily, you and I should also recognize that there are many producers out there who do engage in some sort of performance evaluation program and who have the records, in whatever form, to document results. These may range from breeding/kidding records to birth weights to weaning weights to pedigrees to sire identification, etc. In any case, I would like to see them use such records more frequently for improved merchandizing as well as for proper selection as between keepers and culls.

I also strongly urge prospective buyers to seek out sellers with such documented aspects of performance. Leisurely visual contemplation of prospects is a pleasant enough activity, and it does help one to rule out animals with obvious structural or conformation faults or perhaps lack of femininity or machismo. Beyond that, however, with the possible exception of enjoyable goat gossip and perhaps a libation or two, one’s time is not particularly well spent.

It is my pleasure to use the foregoing prose as lead-in to the very well done Fact Sheet shown below. Its’ author, Dr. Richard Browning, has a considerable history of doing useful research for the meat goat industry. I think especially of his on-going work comparing maternal productivity of three breeds of goats (Spanish, Kiko, and Boer), recently expanded to include Tennessee Myotonic goats (aka fainting or stiff-legged goats).

Moreover, he has also been an early and vocal proponent of on-farm genetic evaluation for herd improvement. As you will find, the following Fact Sheet (**On-Farm Performance Testing for Meat Goat Doe Herds**) can be used as both rationale and guidance for interested and innovative producers.

