WHAT IS SCRAPIE?

Scrapie is a fatal disease that affects the central nervous system of sheep and goats. It belongs to the family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). Other TSEs include bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle, chronic wasting disease in deer and elk and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans.

Scrapie is a reportable disease under the federal Health of Animals Act, and a control program exists to prevent its spread.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLASSICAL AND ATYPICAL SCRAPIE?

Classical – or typical – scrapie is the form of scrapie that is best known by most people. It is the form of scrapie that is primarily transmitted in the fluids of goats and sheep giving birth. Classical scrapie is not considered to be a human health risk.

Atypical scrapie is a newly recognized form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) that differs from classical scrapie, affecting a different part of the brain and producing different reactions on certain biochemical laboratory tests. Most cases are detected in much older, sometimes apparently healthy animals of genotypes associated with increased resistance to classical scrapie.

The latest World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) scrapie chapter says “atypical scrapie is clinically, pathologically, biochemically and epidemiologically unrelated to ‘classical’ scrapie, may not be contagious and in effect, may be a spontaneous degenerative condition of older sheep.”

In recognition of the general international understanding that atypical scrapie is probably not a contagious disease, and occurs frequently as a single case within a herd/flock, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) will not respond to a case of atypical scrapie in the same manner as a case of classical scrapie. Canadian goat herds and sheep flocks in which a case of atypical scrapie is detected will be screened for the presence of concurrent classical scrapie. If classical scrapie is not detected, it is highly unlikely that CFIA will take any additional measures related to the detection of the case of atypical scrapie.

When it comes to human health, there is no basis to suggest that atypical scrapie poses a risk to humans. Finally, the confirmation of atypical scrapie cases has not appeared to have had an impact on international trade and associated requirements.

SCRAPIE – WHAT’S THE CONCERN?

It has been said many times that worrying about scrapie in the goat industry is not a big deal. Scrapie has been predominantly documented in sheep. Canada has had a relatively low number of positive cases reported in goats. So why worry about this?

Even though Canada has had a low number of scrapie positive goats reported, it does not mean that it is not out there. If we have not been actively looking for the disease, we cannot establish a scrapie free status or a minimal risk status if we have not been compiling the statistics to present to the international community.

WHAT IS CANADA DOING NOW TO DETECT AND CONTROL SCRAPIE?

1. National Scrapie Surveillance Program

This is a voluntary program where producers are asked to contact their local CFIA office in the event an animal over the age of 12 months of age dies on farm. Samples can then be collected and sent away for testing for scrapie to help establish the prevalence of scrapie in the national herd.
Under this program, producers are also encouraged to report all goats aged 12 months and older that exhibit the following signs and symptoms:

- Unexplained weight loss
- Problems standing or walking
- Changes in behavior

Animals ordered condemned under this program are eligible for compensation.

2. Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (VSFCP)

This is also a voluntary program. The VSFCP National Standards were developed by the CFIA, in collaboration with the sheep and goat industries, as the basis for Canada’s on-farm, voluntary scrapie control program.

This voluntary program allows enrolled producers to achieve a scrapie free status for their individual herd if all of the guidelines of the program are adhered to for a five-year period.

HOW DOES THE ISSUE OF SCRAPIE AFFECT CANADIAN PRODUCERS’ ABILITY TO IMPORT OR EXPORT BREEDING STOCK?

Whether we like it or not, or agree with it or not, scrapie has become more and more of an issue for the goat industry here in Canada (and around the world). Establishing the prevalence of scrapie, reducing the risk of introducing or spreading the disease, and ultimately, eradication of the disease has become a looming issue for Canada and our trading partners.

As of today, in order to import male sheep and goats from the US (including semen), producers need to obtain an import permit from CFIA. They do not need to be enrolled in the VSFCP. Producers can obtain an import permit by contacting the local CFIA District Office that represents their region and requesting a permit. In the case of males, the American exporting producer does not have to be enrolled in a scrapie program either.

When it comes to importing female sheep and goats (including embryos), things are a little different. Firstly, producers need to be enrolled in the VSFCP prior to obtaining an import permit. To enroll in the program, producers can contact Scrapie Canada for an application package as well as for more information. Once officially enrolled in the program, producers can contact the CFIA to obtain an import permit.

The same goes for producers on the American side. All US producers exporting female sheep and goats to Canada must be enrolled in the US Scrapie Flock Certification Program. This is where a lot of the confusion begins because not all American producers on the US scrapie program can export females into Canada. Canadian producers can import females from any American flock or herd participating at the “Export Monitored” level.

US flocks or herds participating in the “Complete Monitored” level of the program are eligible to export females to Canada only if they have been submitting all mortalities over 18 months of age for scrapie brain testing. Prospective US exporters with “Complete Monitored” flocks or herds need to confirm eligibility with their Area Veterinarian in Charge and obtain a statement that says through record verification, all mortalities over 18 months of age have been submitted for scrapie brain testing. The statement also needs to declare the period of time over which the brain testing has been completed. Prospective Canadian importers will be required to submit a copy of this statement when applying for an import permit if the animals are coming from a flock or herd enrolled on the “Complete Monitored” level.

WHO AND WHAT DETERMINES HOW CANADA ESTABLISHES ITS IMPORT AND EXPORT PROTOCOLS?

Import and export regulations are primarily the responsibility of CFIA; however, the sheep and goat industries are involved in discussions regarding the direction in which these policies will go and are offered opportunity to comment on proposed changes.

It is important to realize that the policies and direction of other countries and organizations play a large role in the direction that Canada takes.

One of the major players in this field is the OIE. The OIE is an intergovernmental, international organization that is responsible for improving animal health worldwide. With 174 member countries and territories, the OIE sets the “gold standards” for animal health. The OIE sets the international standards in regards to scrapie, its control and its surveillance. Canada is a member of the OIE with representation coming from CFIA.

The standards set out for scrapie by the OIE are the standards that other countries (including Canada) look to when setting their own standards.

WHAT CHANGES TO SCRAPIE IS THE OIE LOOKING AT THAT COULD IMPACT CANADA?

In the Spring of 2009, the OIE released its initial recommendations for the revision to its scrapie chapter.

One of the most significant changes the OIE was proposing was to exclude bucks, rams, and semen from “free” status. In other words, the OIE was proposing that bucks, rams, and semen could not be traded as they are now, but rather, they could only be traded between herds and flocks that were enrolled on a scrapie certification program and were at equal or higher levels. For Canadian
producers, this would mean that if Canada adopted the OIE's proposed changes, we would no longer be able to import bucks in the manner we have been doing. To import a buck into Canada, the importer would have to be enrolled in the VSFCP, and the person he or she were importing from would have to be enrolled in a similar program in his or her country at an equal or higher level.

The Canadian goat and sheep industries had opportunity to comment on these proposed changes by the OIE, and CNGF in conjunction with the sheep industry submitted comments on this subject. The position of CNGF was that we did NOT support the OIE recommendations to restrict the movement of bucks or semen in the manner they described. The joint comments submitted by the goat and sheep industries outlined a number of scientific studies to substantiate our opposition to this, as all responses to the OIE must include scientific data to support a member's position.

In early November, CNGF was informed of the response of the OIE in regards to the Canadian goat and sheep industries. In regards to semen, the OIE stated: “In response to the comment of Canada on the safety of semen, the Code Commission included semen in Article 14.9.1. as a safe commodity.”

In response to the comments regarding the movement of bucks, the OIE stated: “The Code Commission did not agree with the Canadian request to permit the introduction of rams and bucks from establishments other than free establishments, although it had been permitted in the 2008 edition of the Terrestrial Code. There may be a small risk that rams and bucks, if infected with scrapie, could transmit scrapie via saliva and faeces.”

CNGF, in conjunction with the Canadian Sheep Federation, will be preparing comments once again in early December to be submitted to the OIE regarding its position on the movement of bucks.

While the OIE does NOT dictate what Canada does or does not do in regards to our scrapie programs and import and export, it DOES have a large bearing on how we will proceed. Our largest immediate trading partner (as far as imports goes) is the US. The US has already committed a large amount of human and financial resources to the eradication of scrapie and intends to be declared scrapie free by 2017. The US has indicated that it is fully prepared to accept and implement whatever guidelines the OIE proposes.

It is yet unknown when the OIE will release its final guidelines in regard to scrapie. At this time, there are no immediate changes planned to Canadian import/export protocols. When the OIE releases its final guidelines, Canada, the US, and other countries will begin the process of seeing whether or not they want to adopt these guidelines.

More information on scrapie can be found at the following links:

- Scrapie Canada: http://www.scrapiederland.ca/
- OIE: http://www.oie.int/eng/normes/mcode/code2006/en_chapitre_2.4.8.htm

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