



SEPTEMBER 2015: The Importance of Record-Keeping

You Can't Manage What You Don't Measure

Keeping good records can be a key to goat farming success. Not only do records help you keep on top of production, feeding, and profitability, they also ensure you're meeting food safety and traceability requirements. Most importantly, though, they're a great tool for continuous improvement of your herd and your farm.

Although record-keeping differs from farm to farm, it doesn't have to be a complicated under-taking. It can be easy to get started – and the benefits will soon start making the efforts worthwhile.

From the farm – a goat herd record-keeping system in action

Peter and Amy Vingerhoeds have a growing 100 doe commercial Boer-cross herd on their 100 acre South Huron-area farm, where they've lived with their four daughters since 2001. Goats are a family affair for the Vingerhoeds – they've all been involved as members and volunteers with the Huron County 4-H Goat Club. Peter also works as a nutritionist at their livestock premix business, BSC Animal Nutrition, in St. Marys ON.



For ten years, they ran a small hobby herd of commercial Boer-cross goats, keeping only limited records of feed and supply purchases, as well as livestock sales. While the herd size ranged between 20 and 30 does, the family identified most animals by their unique colours and personalities, and kept replacements based on conformation. When they built a new, naturally ventilated barn in 2012, expanded the herd and transitioned to year-round kidding in full confinement, record-keeping became increasingly important.

First, Peter wanted to get a really good handle on production capability: tracking genetic lines, calculating average daily gains, and determining feed and production costs per kid and per doe.

Second, their herd tested negative for Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis (CAE) and Q-Fever, and as they made the decision to populate the new barn with their own stock, Peter and Amy needed doe production and health records to select the best replacements and cull lower producing animals.

The Goat Gazette – September 2015

The starting point was identifying each goat with management ear tags. Amy then made a habit of recording all birth information in the Lambing Diary available from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), a pocket sized notebook with room for over 120 kiddings – an easy and inexpensive step.

By participating in the Pilot Traceability Project with Ontario Goat, the Vingerhoeds also tested RFID tags, and collected benchmark weight data at zero, 50 and 100 days. Amy designed spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel which allowed her to easily record weights customize recordkeeping to their operation.

In the Vingerhoeds' operation, groups of 15 to 20 does are penned by age and gestation stage, so Amy prefers to see all the goats in one pen on a single page, one row of information per goat. Spreadsheet cells contain animal identification, sires and dams, vaccination status, health issues, and hoof clipping dates as well as blank columns where additional information can be recorded, like breeding and kidding dates, pregnancy checks, arising health issues, updated vaccinations etc.

As each kidding season passes, the blank boxes fill up with handwritten notes, and jobs are highlighted as they are completed, making it easy to pinpoint the last few goats that still need to kid or have hooves trimmed.

Finally, the Excel files are updated and a new page is reprinted for each pen for the next kidding season.

How record-keeping has made a difference on the Vingerhoeds' farm

Since implementing their record-keeping system, Peter and Amy can better define how management changes are impacting overall herd production. This is what they say:

- Using Excel for records allows us to sort data just about any way we want. We can easily generate lists of marketed kids (trace goats in and out), average weights per group, individual and average ADG (average daily gain), and average days to market. Weighing each kid three times and calculating gains allows us to better predict when kids are ready to go to market. We also have our own data to prove whether a new treatment in the barn is worthwhile. Lists of kids can be sorted by dam to generate doe production records to calculate average days to market, total meat produced, or total value of kids produced for each doe. We get a pretty good idea of which goats are earning their way.
- Hoof maintenance is definitely one management factor that has tightened up since we started recording it. We know that most goats in our herd need hooves trimmed about every five months, and every doe is checked at kidding time. Does with sore feet don't spend as much time at the feeder, and don't make as much milk for their kids, so it is a pretty critical job to keep on top of.
- ONE-PAGE-PER-PEN spreadsheets are continuously edited and modified, so the last addition was to track the parity and number of kids raised. Higher parity does can be highlighted so we can watch them more closely through each gestation. We want to keep replacements from these proven does with excellent longevity, but we also need to monitor them more closely for pregnancy toxemia, body condition, hoof health and udder condition. Kids raised per year is our prime indicator of doe production, and when that number begins to decline, the does can be sold for meat while they still have good body condition.
- We believe the most useful information is the notes that get jotted down. Highlighting those notes in different colours helps us spot trends within the herd. Better yet, when we sort a list of kids by

dam the combined jot notes covering all parities tells the most accurate story, so we can select the replacements and culls with total confidence. Culling more aggressively has meant less kidding issues and higher productivity.

Amy's top tips for record-keeping

- **Work to your strengths.** Amy was already well-versed working with Excel, loving its versatility and data sorting capabilities. Combined with a colour printer, cardstock paper and binder, Amy developed her own simple and time-efficient record system that the whole family can access on their farm. Digital gadgets are great for the tech savvy, and she even knows one producer who even wrote his own app syncing his digital scale to his smart phone – something she says is great for him but not a good fit for her. Her advice: “Just work with a record keeping system that you *can* and *will* keep using.”
- **Designate a place to work and store your recordkeeping tools.** Amy has repurposed a workbench in the barn's utility room where she stands to update records by hand, and on the shelf below, stores ear tags and other goat supplies. A two-inch binder stores all the printed spreadsheets for each pen and NOTHING else is allowed to be piled in this area. According to Amy, it only takes a few minutes every time there is something to record, and a couple hours on the computer once a month to update notes.

For more information on record-keeping for goats along with template forms, consult the Ontario Goat Best Management Practices Manual, contact Ontario Goat at 1-866-311-6422 or info@livestockalliance.ca, or visit www.ontariogoat.ca.