Topic 11. Sheep

Sheep are commonly kept in small and backyard operations and are often managed in pasture-based or mixed housing systems. From a biosecurity perspective, sheep management focuses on understanding how movement, environment, diet, and routine handling influence disease pathways over time.

Animal movement is a central consideration in sheep biosecurity. Sheep may be introduced from outside sources, moved between pastures, transported for breeding or sale, or temporarily commingled at shared facilities. Each movement creates opportunities for indirect exposure through contact with other animals, people, equipment, or environments. Biosecurity education emphasizes recognizing when these movements occur and how they affect overall flock health.

Environmental interfaces also play an important role. Sheep frequently interact with open pasture, fencing, shelter areas, and adjacent land uses. Wildlife, including birds, small mammals, and cervids, may pass through sheep areas without direct interaction but still contribute to background exposure risk. Educational approaches focus on awareness of these interfaces rather than attempting to fully control wildlife presence.

Dietary considerations are particularly important for sheep and differ from those of goats. Sheep have a higher sensitivity to copper, which affects feed selection, mineral supplementation, and shared feeding practices. From a biosecurity and health perspective, understanding how feed is sourced, stored, and distributed—and how it is matched to species-specific needs—helps reduce unintended risks. For this reason, sheep feeding considerations are addressed separately from goats.

Health monitoring is a key component of sheep biosecurity. Regular observation of behavior, posture, movement, appetite, and flock dynamics helps establish what is normal for a given group. In small operations, familiarity with individual animals or consistent groups can support early recognition of changes. When observations are linked with basic records, they can provide useful context over time.

In the United States, sheep are included in the USDA Scrapie Eradication Program, a national effort to monitor and reduce the occurrence of scrapie in small ruminants. From an educational standpoint, scrapie monitoring highlights the importance of animal identification, movement awareness, and recordkeeping at the flock level. Understanding that sheep are part of a broader disease monitoring framework helps place identification and health records in context without focusing on specific regulatory requirements.

Biosecurity education for sheep emphasizes situational awareness rather than standardized protocols. Sheep operations vary widely in size, purpose, and management style. Educational materials therefore focus on understanding how movement, environment, diet, and observation interact, supporting informed evaluation of risk within the realities of sheep husbandry.

References

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