



Antibiotic use on the farm: An Oregon shepherd's story

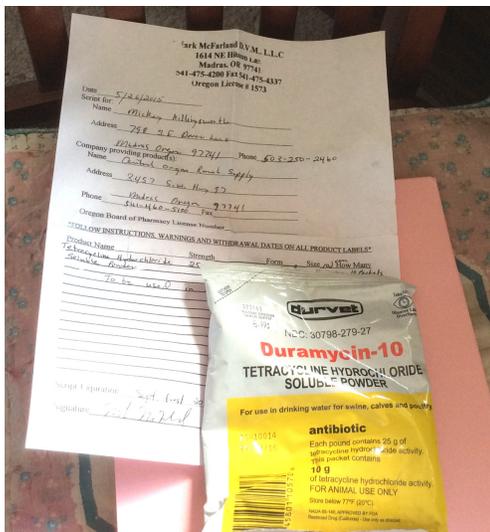


Photo above: Sheep on the farm of Mickey Killingsworth in Madras.

Ranchers and farmers with livestock care about and take pride in the welfare of their animals, and work hard to ensure their health and safety. Healthy animals mean healthy food. Not only is it the right thing to do, farmers' and ranchers' livelihoods depend upon it.

Public concern about antibiotic use in animals stems from consumers not understanding why and how it's used. A farmer uses antibiotics to protect animals against disease, unnecessary suffering, and death. Sometimes a herd or flock is treated with antibiotics to prevent the spread of sickness across an entire population of animals on a farm.

Mickey Killingsworth of Jefferson County Farm Bureau raises sheep on her farm in Madras in Central Oregon. Giving antibiotics to her sheep after shearing is an invaluable tool to keep her animals safe and healthy.



“The management practice of shearing the wool from the sheep is also a health maintenance process to avoid fly-strike,” said Killingsworth. “After we shear the ewes, which are the female sheep, it can be very stressful for the baby lambs because it’s difficult for them to recognize their mothers without wool. Lambs recognize their mothers by the scent from the wool and the bleating sounds their moms make. As a shepherd, I keep a close eye on the pairs so the mothers and babies bond back, and no lambs are abandoned.”

Such young lambs have undeveloped immunity systems, and this distress can leave them highly susceptible to a quick-acting pneumonia.

“If the baby lambs contract quick pneumonia, it will kill them within 24 to 48 hours,” said Killingsworth.

After a significant mortality rate in her young lambs following shearing, Killingsworth contacted her veterinarian to find a solution.

Photo above: The veterinarian gave Killingsworth a prescription for the antibiotic given to the sheep via their drinking water.

“My vet and I decided to try putting a tetracycline hydrochloride antibiotic powder in the ewes' drinking water for five days prior to shearing and two days after shearing,” she said.

The antibiotic passes from the ewe to her lambs through the milk and raises the babies' immunity level, leaving them much less vulnerable to sickness.

“Doing this has stopped the problem and has saved the lives of hundreds of baby lambs,” said Killingsworth. “The antibiotic also protects the ewes from infection if they get any small cuts during shearing.”

Killingsworth and her vet determined that putting an antibiotic in the drinking water was a better practice than giving an injection to individual animals.

“To give every ewe and her offspring a shot of a long-acting antibiotic will leave a longer residue or withdrawal than giving the oral antibiotic in the water,” said Killingsworth. “It’s about the proper use of antibiotics and working closely with your vet.”

She added, “Sheep are a minor species, so most of the time shepherds need a prescription from their vet if the antibiotic’s label doesn’t specifically list it for sheep.”

