

Main conclusions and recommendations

in

Khlij E. (ed.), Ben Hamouda M. (ed.), Gabiña D. (ed.).
Mutations des systèmes d'élevage des ovins et perspectives de leur durabilité

Zaragoza : CIHEAM / IRESA / OEP
Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 97

2011
pages 167-168

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=801465>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Main conclusions and recommendations. In : Khlij E. (ed.), Ben Hamouda M. (ed.), Gabiña D. (ed.). *Mutations des systèmes d'élevage des ovins et perspectives de leur durabilité*. Zaragoza : CIHEAM / IRESA / OEP, 2011. p. 167-168 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 97)



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Main conclusions and recommendations

The International Seminar on "Mutations of the sheep production systems and perspectives for their sustainability" was held in Hammamet, (Tunisia) from the 22nd to the 23rd October 2008. Two hundreds and fifty participants from different national and international institutions attended and the Seminar was an opportunity to present conferences and papers in a plenary session, four thematic sessions and a poster session. The thematic sessions were related to: (i) mutations of the feeding systems; (ii) quality of products and market requirements; (iii) techniques and biotechnologies of reproduction; and (iv) genetic improvement and organisation of selection schemes.

All participants agreed that the seminar was a great opportunity to discuss on the sheep sector bearing in mind the current social, economic and ecological context. The main ideas that emerged from the seminar are here below summarised:

(i) The observed deep mutations of the sheep production systems particularly in some Mediterranean areas where the production systems heavily rely on the use of concentrates.

(ii) An overall regression of the sheep population, of the number of sheep farms and of the contribution of the sheep sector to the overall economic value of the agriculture sector.

(iii) These changes are mainly related to the world economic context causing negative repercussions on the beneficiary margin of sheep farms.

(iv) Expansion of other agricultural activities (arboriculture, cropping...) in the centre and south of Tunisia took place on the agro-pastoral space naturally reserved for sheep flocks and this has caused deep changes in the production systems.

(v) There are real opportunities to better exploit local feeding resources, whether pastoral, forage or agro-industrial by products, in order to substitute imported feed.

(vi) In the area of reproduction, there is a wide range of techniques that can optimise reproduction according to the level of intensification.

(vii) The use of reproductive biotechnologies can boost impacts of genetic improvement programmes.

(viii) Protocols to simplify on-farm performance recording opens up wide perspectives to enlarge selection base and further improve effectiveness of genetic improvement programmes.

The rich discussions that followed presentations yielded the main following recommendations:

(i) Make rational the use of concentrates by sheep.

(ii) Anticipate on the periods of feed scarcity from favourable years.

(iii) In view of the prevailing situation and to what happens elsewhere, maintain and reinforce support to sheep farmers.

(iv) Promote profitability of sheep production through improvement of the productivity and also a greater valorisation of the products and their quality.

(v) Capitalise on research findings in this field and ensure sustainable mechanisms of transfer of these findings to sheep breeders.

(vi) Facilitate emergence of professional organisations (national and regional breeders associations) and reinforce those already existing through their implication in strategic choices

concerning the sector. Build up an exchange programme for these associations with other established associations in some Mediterranean countries.

(vii) Encourage undertaking focused technical-economic studies that can be used as a referential for planners in this sector and that can serve to predict the market demand for sheep products and their quality.