



*European Thematic Network for interactive and innovative knowledge exchange on sheep health and nutrition*

## Policy Brief

**‘From the sheep farmers’ needs to the research gaps’**

10/06/2023



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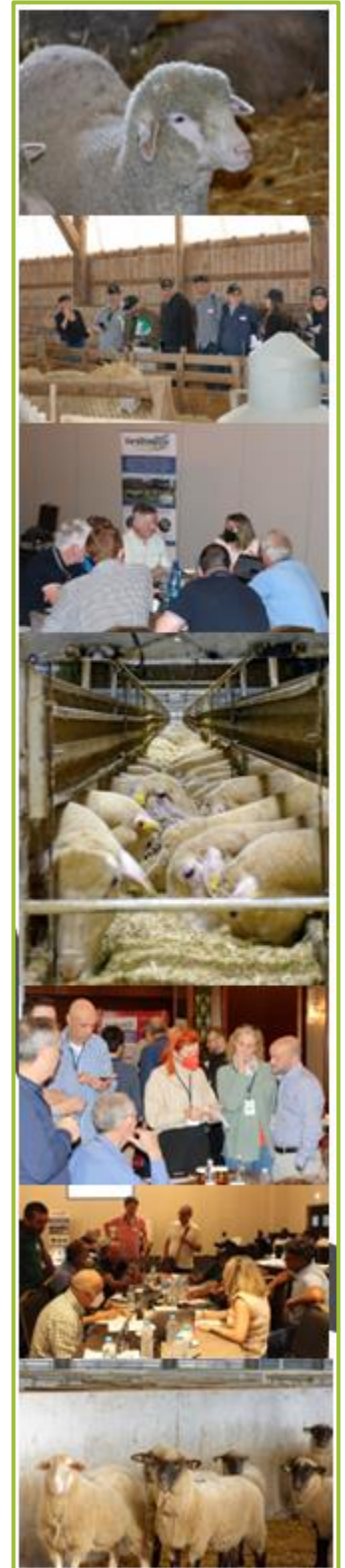
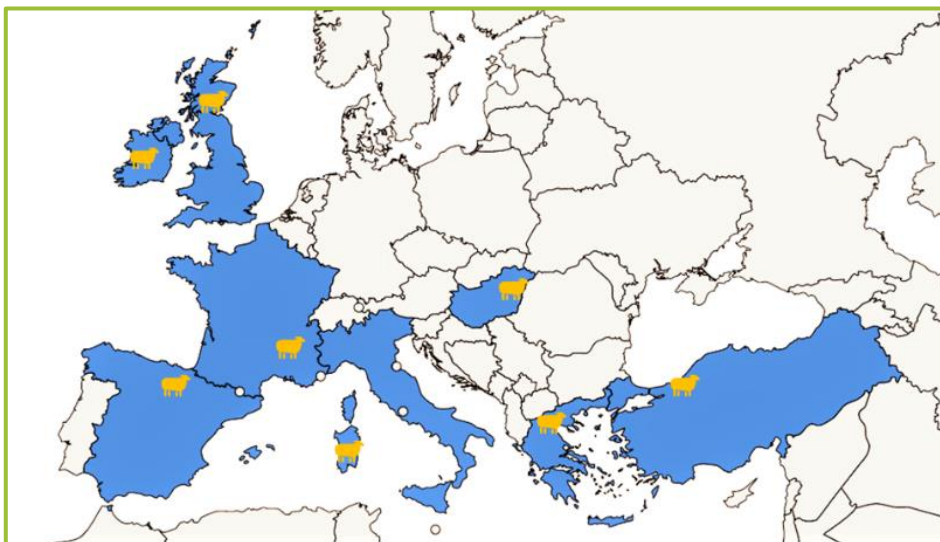


## What is EuroSheep?



EuroSheep, which started in January 2020, was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme and is a continuation from the SheepNet project.

EuroSheep focused on milking ewes, lambs and replacement animals. The aim of EuroSheep is to improve sheep profitability through health and nutrition management and encourage the exchange of best practices and knowledge between sheep farmers, stakeholders and researchers across Europe. EuroSheep is an innovative thematic network, which has brought together a wide range of stakeholders from the main sheep producing countries in Europe (Ireland, France, Italy, Greece, Hungary and Spain, which account for approximately 80% of the EU sheep flocks), and from Turkey and the UK.



## ❖ General findings

In general, the findings of the project confirm that:

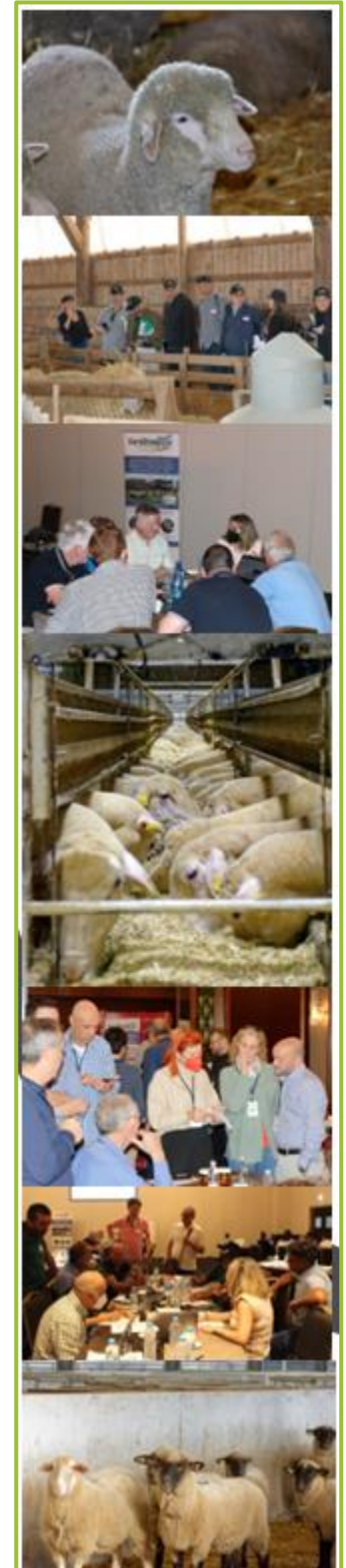
- There is **major scope to improve ewe efficiency and productivity (and thus profitability)** with better nutrition and health management.
- The **needs of producers are similar** across a diverse range of systems, regions and countries.
- **Solutions exist** for many of the needs and challenges identified by sheep producers and are transferable across the EU and beyond.
- **Information source** used to obtain information on sheep health and nutrition management **depends on the type of stakeholder**, and the region they are in, requiring the information.
- **Good communication** consists of using **many different types of media** and translating into the native language to deliver the information.
- There are **many best practices** at farm level that are **transferable** to improve efficiency and profitability on sheep farms.
- **Networking is a long process** that need the strong involvement of stakeholders thus the duration of Thematic Networks should be at least 4 years – profiting from SheepNet previous network has been invaluable
- The **impact of the pandemic has been huge** on the networking activities, and although using online methods allowed for exchanges to continue, this could not replace the multi-actor dynamic that face to face workshops allow.
- 3 years is a relatively short time to adapt and implement all the solutions produced by the stakeholders and **results need to be promoted after the end of the project.**

## ❖ Key messages

Two key messages have been developed into policy briefs:

- 1) Assessing multi-actor approach post-Covid 19
- 2) **From the sheep farmers' needs to the research gaps**

This document presents the **second key message and recommendations.**



## What are the challenges?



From May to July 2020 an **online survey** was launched in the participant countries within the EuroSheep project **to identify the main challenges and needs** to enhance the efficiency, productivity and profitability of sheep farming through the **nutrition and health** of adult sheep, yearlings and lambs, as well as the potential best management practices.

Participants were requested to select and rank in order of importance, up to a maximum of five topics from a set list (gathering main challenges and needs), what they considered as the main issues regarding nutrition and health of sheep, yearlings or lambs.

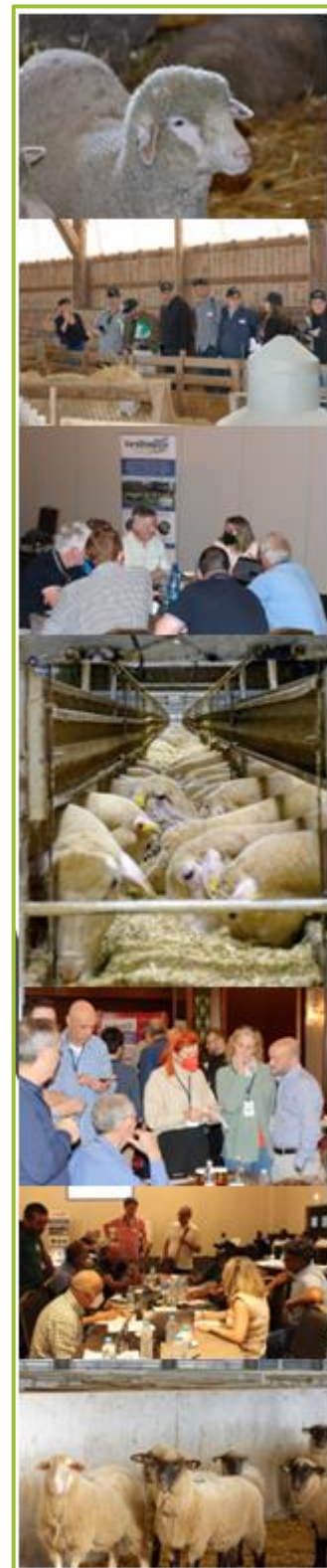
**In total, 61 needs were identified** and selected by the sheep farmers and stakeholders. Many of the same needs were selected in most of the countries indicating that producers in different countries/regions have the similar needs/issues in sheep production.

**For sheep nutrition management**, the main challenges were related to:

- ❖ “deeper knowledge of nutrition requirements” in the different ages and stages of development,
- ❖ “grassland and grazing management”,
- ❖ “forage feed value”,
- ❖ “lamb performance targets from birth to weaning”,
- ❖ “weaning management” for both lambs and replacement,
- ❖ “nutrition requirements for the 1<sup>st</sup> lactation”.

**For the sheep health**, the main challenges were related to:

- ❖ “internal parasitism” for adults, replacement and lambs, in particular “coccidiosis” for this last category.
- ❖ “lameness”,
- ❖ “mastitis” for both dairy and meat sheep,
- ❖ “neonatal disease”,
- ❖ “acute death of lambs”,
- ❖ “flock health plan” management.





## What did we learn from EuroSheep?

To address those challenges, the EuroSheep network produced **96 practical solutions, 52 tips and tricks and 26 technical factsheets.**

As a complement, following the implementation of some of the solutions, **167 evaluations were completed** by farmers, advisors and other stakeholders.

**A cross-analysis was then undertaken**, looking at the needs, solutions, tips and tricks and factsheets proposed, alongside the evaluations, to **assess which needs were not addressed**, and where **further research** would be warranted.

Many of the proposed solutions were **worth being implemented** in different countries, but may **require small adaptations**, due to the particularities in the local environment and system of production.

It is therefore important to continue **disseminating and promoting the re-appropriation of EuroSheep outcomes** in existing advisory and development organisations. A continued dissemination of the EuroSheep solutions, tips and tricks and factsheets should be encouraged because of their relevance to improving profitability of sheep systems across Europe.

**The main remaining gap in sheep nutrition** is related to the **rearing of ewe lambs** to ensure robustness of the breed, and the **nutritional requirements of females during their first gestation and lactation**. In particular, how to tackle the rusticity or robustness of the breed in order to implement a more progressive or sudden weaning management.

**In terms of health**, the proposed solution for **managing ecthyma** needs to be completed because in some countries, the vaccine is not available. More generally for health solutions, the heterogeneity of the countries regarding the **availability/access to some medicines** (for example vaccine agreements) or to laboratory for analysis is a problem to disseminate some of the proposed practical solutions.

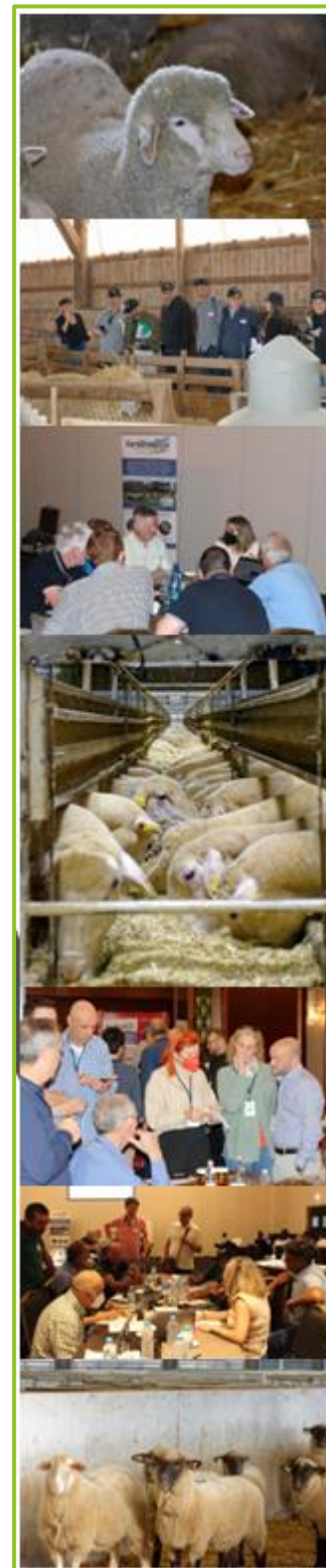




## What do we recommend?

Following the previous considerations, we recommend:

- 1) Further **research on the effect of weaning management on the development of ewe lambs** depending on the breed genotype, and the **nutrition of ewe lambs until the end of the first lactation** to improve advice on nutrition management especially regarding robustness aspects.
- 2) For sheep health, when solutions involve the use of medicines, we recommend to **further research alternatives which would not need national agreements or regulations**, to encourage uptake by farmers.
- 3) In complement we would like to recommend **any support to the development of laboratory services when their availability is limited** for farmers, to foster prevention methods and the reduction of the use of treatments.
- 4) **Be aware** that solutions improving prevention methods (in opposition to curative methods) may not be suitable in every country.
- 5) For knowledge transfer, we recommend **continuing the dissemination and promotion of the re-appropriation of the EuroSheep best practices** by the sheep sector' stakeholders. Many solutions are already known by research and advisors, but the transfer to farmers is a long process which needs repetitions to reach its target.
- 6) In general, there is a lack of medicines being developed and registered specifically for sheep, so **further research is also required to assess the adaptation and application to sheep of medicines developed initially for other species**.
- 7) **A step by step approach**, from farmers' needs to practical and scientific knowledge solutions, is a valuable way to identify any gaps and future research needed.



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