

Rockeman discusses challenges facing ruminant genetic improvement in Ethiopia



Kurt A. Rockeman with the United States Agency for International Development recently spent time at the Cooperative Agricultural Research Center discussing the state of Ethiopian agriculture and the role of livestock in the system.

Rockeman shared his experience and knowledge with a number of students, faculty and staff at the CARC concerning agriculture in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is considered an agricultural country and 85% of the population depends upon agriculture as their primary means of livelihood, either in subsistence form, labor form or marketing of crops. The country relies on not only cattle, but sheep and goats, to assist in its agricultural endeavors.

According to Rockeman, the country's goat population is not composed of pure bred or pedigreed ruminants. The specimens are largely based on appearance. In addition, the country's environment subjects ruminants to harsh conditions, including healthcare, climate and feeding.

"All of this means that the productivity of livestock in Ethiopia is affected in such a way that it's low. It does not mean that they're not genetically capable of doing more. They're just undernourished and in poor health," Rockeman said. "They constitute a huge, almost undifferentiated gene pool."

In order to establish specific breeds and pedigrees, Rockeman said it would take time and it would be a "labor of love" that would prove to be a difficult task, as the diverse gene pool would absorb the variations.

Rockeman said Prairie View A&M University's Ethiopian Sheep and Goat Productivity Improvement Program in the College of Agriculture is making a concerted effort to counteract the problem. The project entails the importation of pedigreed Dorper sheep and Boer goats to increase the capacity for small ruminant breeding.

"As near as we could determine, that is the first time there has been any real importation of what I call foundation stock to establish a foundation herd of goats and a foundation flock of sheep with enough of a population with enough genetics that it can be bred and maintained as pure bred animals," Rockeman said.

The key to achieving the goal is not through technology. It is through establishing and maintaining the systems, he said.

"The technology and the approaches used in the Prairie View project are sound. I would leave it with some more pointed and aggressive efforts to encourage the establishment of private business operations," he added.



Rockeman has 25 years of experience designing, managing and evaluating the impact of agricultural, rural economic development, natural resource management and environmental projects and programs in Central America and Eastern/Southern Africa. He was an agricultural credit advisor in Honduras prior to becoming a career Foreign Service Officer with the USAID, where he has served in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Malawi, Mozambique and Somalia. He currently resides in Watford City, North Dakota where he works as a consultant. He is also raises registered Polled Hereford cattle.