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Hotline Number to Reach and Offer Agricultural Information to Plain Anabaptists during the COVID-19 Workplace Closures

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Abstract: The Penn State Extension Animal Systems Team developed a toll-free hotline phone number to convey short educational messages to maintain contact and outreach to Pennsylvania's animal producing Amish, Mennonite, and other plain Anabaptist populations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Penn State Extension's programming went largely online via webinars, online courses, and emails. This change in programming excluded a large sector of Pennsylvania farmers who do not use or have access to the internet and, as such, were liable to miss important best management practice reviews and timely updates in animal agriculture. The Animal Systems Hotline offered callers the choice to listen to pre-recorded messages from dairy, equine, livestock, and poultry Extensions. Across the Animal Systems Team, during a span of approximately 22 weeks, a total of 111 messages were uploaded to the Hotline, with a total of 2,201 people calling in to the Hotline. Topics varied across the Extensions from the basics of animal husbandry and health to pasture and nutrition management. Since the development of the Hotline, Extension educators have received calls from plain producers requesting more information about the topics covered on the Hotline messages. While there were challenges with the system used for the Hotline and data collection, the broad reach and numerous callers indicates that the Hotline was a successful method of connecting with plain audiences. [Abstract by authors.]

Keywords: poultry; dairy; equine; livestock; agricultural outreach; agricultural Extension; coronavirus pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The Penn State Extension Animal Systems Team is comprised of Extension educators, associates, and faculty from dairy, livestock, equine, and poultry sciences. Penn State Extension's mission is to provide science-based education to all Pennsylvanians. Extension educators offer a diverse range of programs to extend agriculture education to producers, including hands-on workshops to develop a skill, one-on-one farm visits, pasture walks, farm tours, round-table discussions, etc. With the COVID-19 pandemic came the increased use of virtual platforms for Penn State Extension staff and faculty to educate farmers. However, several plain Anabaptist denominations that do not use modern technologies or internet call Pennsylvania home. As Extension educators, part of the job is to develop new and creative strategies that give people from all lifestyles access to educational information. Therefore, it was necessary to come up with a method to reach plain producers who do not use the internet.

The Animal Systems Hotline phone number was an idea adopted from the Penn State Extension Horticulture Team. The Horticulture Team developed the Hotline used mainly in the summer season to update producers on insect counts and offer disease forecast information in 90 second clips. The Animal Systems Team wanted to expand on this idea to reach more producers during the unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many plain farmers have access to a phone that they can use to call a toll-free number one time per week and listen to an educational recording about a sector of their choice. The Penn State Extension Animal Systems Hotline has been operating since January 2021 and has six sectors from which individuals can choose: (1) dairy, (2) beef, (3) sheep and goats, (4) equine, (5) poultry, and (6) swine. A new, two-to-five-minute message for each sector is uploaded to the line every Monday morning. Topics are selected by each team depending on the specific audience (small and backyard flock poultry vs. commercial poultry), existing fact sheets and scripts (sheep & goats), best practice reminders (dairy, equine, beef), and important and timely health updates (all teams). This Hotline is an outreach effort to best serve a community with unique challenges in a world that has gone virtual. There are many diverse farming cultures in

Pennsylvania but none more reliant on the Animal Systems Team than plain people.

Since plain Anabaptist farmers are the intended audience for this educational platform, business card-sized flyers about the Hotline were distributed in feed stores and local businesses, to individual producers, and on bulletin boards at community spots. No registration is required; once producers have the Hotline number, they can call in each week, choose the extension with the desired recording, and listen to the recording for that week. The Hotline is a quick, easy way to learn something new or just be reminded of farming best management practice. Data collected from the Animal Systems Hotline is reported in this article.

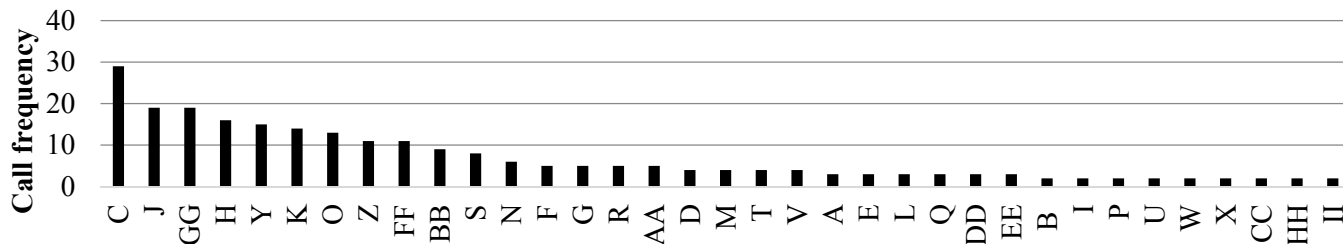
TEAM ACTIVITY

Dairy Team Extension

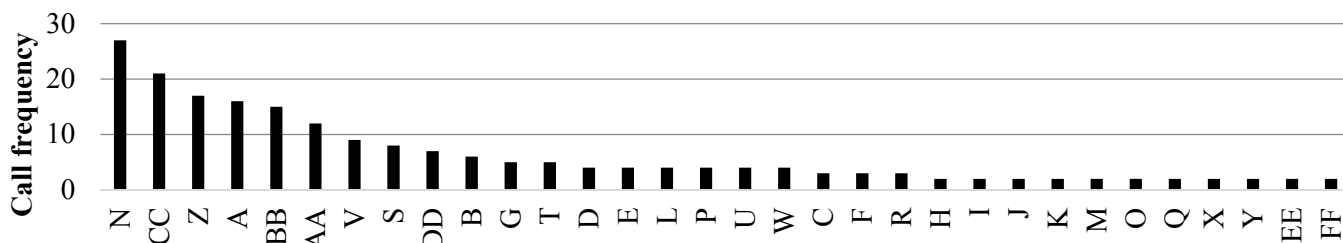
The Penn State Extension Dairy Team has developed recordings for the Hotline on various topics including farm financial management, dairy calf care, pest management, and milk quality (Table 1). Figure 1 displays the percentage of calls by topic to the Dairy Extension and all other Extensions. One goal is to keep recordings timely and interesting for the producers. For example, a couple weeks before corn silage harvesting time, the educators will post recordings relating to silo safety and proper corn silage storage strategies. The dairy producers that are listening to these educational recordings most likely already know how to manage the tasks we discuss on the Hotline, but it is helpful to get a quick reminder so that the basics do not get overlooked. Some of the messages may be new information for beginner dairy farmers. At the end of each recorded message, the educator recording the message states his or her name and contact information so producers can contact the educator with follow-up questions.

Before COVID-19, the Dairy Team relied heavily on one-on-one farm visits, field days, on-farm workshops, pasture walks, and various types of in-person meetings to relay educational information to plain producers. For the health and safety of all Extension staff and for the producers, in-person contact was limited. The most challenging obstacle of starting a new Extension program

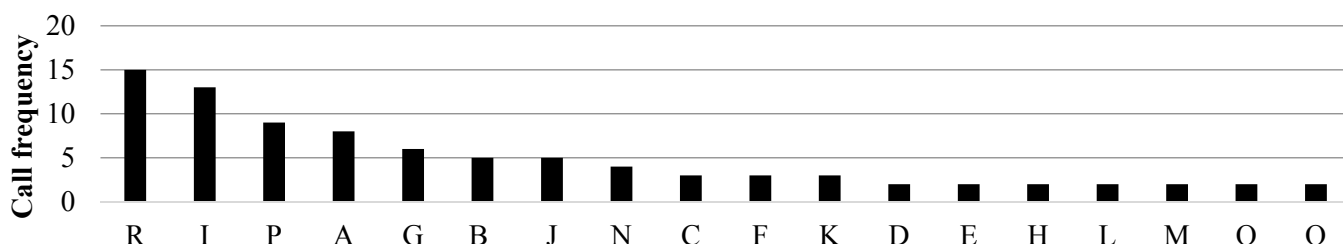
FIGURE 1: INDIVIDUAL CALLERS: FREQUENCY OF CALL-INS TO THE FIVE HOTLINES



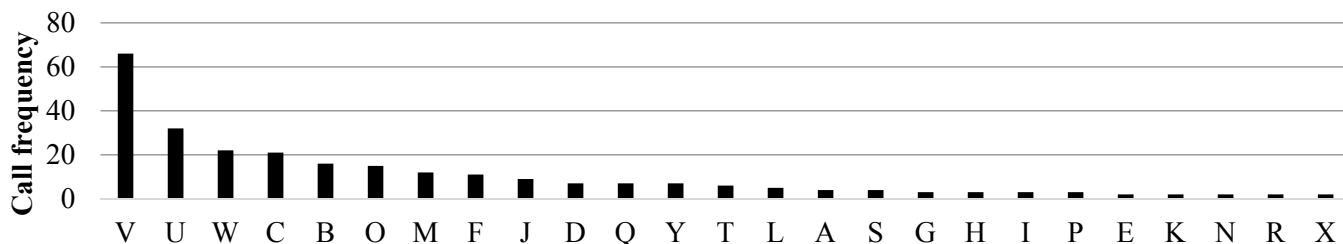
Dairy Line: Individual Callers



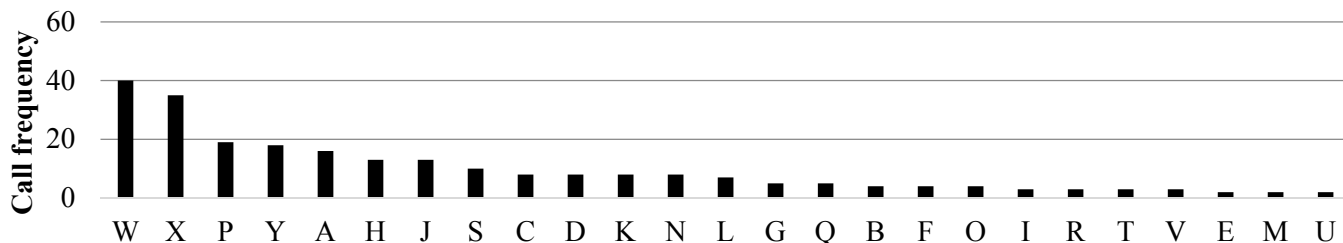
Equine Line: Individual Callers



Poultry Line: Individual Callers



Beef Line: Individual Callers



Sheep and Goat: Individual Callers

Caller letters are uniquely assigned in each figure and do not represent the same individual across the figures.

during a global pandemic is getting the word out. The Dairy Team was hopeful that as more plain producers called in to listen to the recordings, they would share the Hotline’s number with their family

FIGURE 2: CALLS BY TOPIC, DAIRY HOTLINE

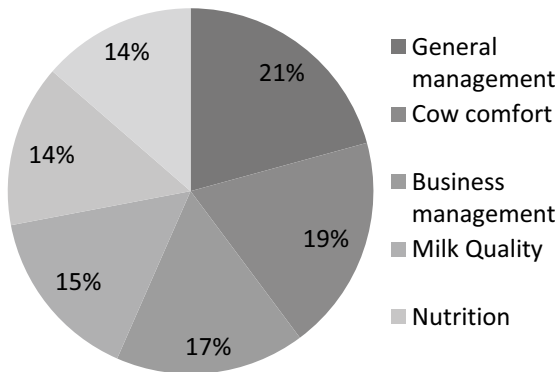


TABLE 1: DAIRY TEAM POSTS & CALL VOLUME (2021)

Week	Date	Topic	Calls
1	1/11	Handling Chronic Mastitis Cows	57
2	1/18	Dairy Revenue Protection	47
3	1/25	Tax Preparation	49
4	2/01	Cow Comfort- Bedding	45
5	2/08	Calf Jackets	47
6	2/15	Coverage: Agriculture Risk/Price Loss	43
7	2/22	Heifer Mastitis	48
8	3/01	Starter Intake in Calves	41
9	3/08	Body Condition Scoring	43
10	3/15	Feeding Small Grain Silage	39
11	3/22	Beef x Dairy	46
12	3/29	Grazing Management	60
13	4/05	Heat Stress	47
14	4/12	Fly Control	37
15	4/19	Detecting Transition Cow Problems	24
16	4/26	Feeding for Components	23
17	5/03	Lameness	29
18	5/10	Heat Detection	20
19	5/17	Weaning Slumps	25
20	5/24	Tunnel Ventilation	21
21	5/31	Water Intake	20
22	6/07	Timely Insemination	18

members and neighbors via word-of-mouth. The first 12 weeks the Hotline recordings were available, the dairy extension received a steady number of calls (Table 1). Around week 13 the number of calls into the dairy extension began to drop off. This could be due to the warmer weather bringing a very busy season for dairy farmers (e.g., corn planting season, small grain/hay harvesting, etc.).

A few of the educators that had recorded messages for the Dairy Extension have received call-backs from producers. The call-backs were regarding the topics of milk quality, organic dairy fly management, and cow comfort. The Hotline has been a positive outreach method for educators working with producers they may have otherwise never met. Some people consistently call into the line each week and some individual callers have

listened to multiple recordings over the lifetime of the Animal Systems Hotline (Figure 1). The six categories of dairy topics were fairly evenly accessed (Figure 2).

Equine Team Extension

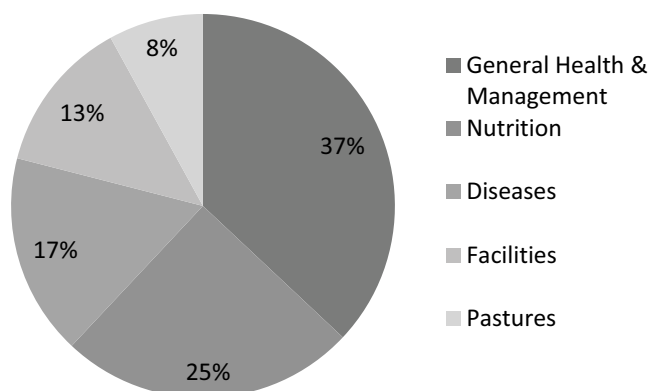
Among the Amish and many Old Order Mennonites, horses are still vital for transportation and farm management. Prior to COVID-19, the Penn State Extension Equine Team hosted in-person events and personal consults and wrote articles in the local newspapers to connect with plain people and share information about horse health and care. The Hotline became a critical means of connecting during COVID-19 when in-person events and consults were not possible.

The Penn State Extension Equine Team recorded phone messages in the following topic areas: nutrition, general health and management, pasture management, and facility upkeep (Table 2). The time of year was also considered when selecting topics for recordings. For

example, recordings about blanketing and the importance of forage were shared in the winter, while a focus on pastures and water intake for horses was recorded in the summer.

Figure 3 shows that the majority of equine topics covered focused on either nutrition (25%) or general health and management (37%). The top five most popular recordings were: choosing hay (26 calls), small strongyles (19 calls), rain rot and scratches (17 calls), temperature/pulse/respiration (TPR) (16 calls), and thrush (14 calls). Of the top five most popular, four of the five were call-ins made shortly after ads were placed in a local newspaper highlighting the Hotline.

FIGURE 3: CALLS BY TOPIC, EQUINE HOTLINE



Poultry Team Extension

Poultry rearing and production are an integral part of plain people’s lives. Some families may contract with an integrated commercial poultry operation, but more often, families and communities have small flocks of poultry for home consumption or sale at farm and live bird markets. Commercial integrators are more likely to have service technicians on staff to consult with the unique issues facing commercial-style housing and birds. As such, Penn State Extension’s Poultry Team chose to focus on small and backyard poultry flocks for their hotline messages (Table 3 and Figure 4).

Prior to COVID-19, plain people met the Poultry Team at in-person meetings, through on-farm and phone consultations, and at conferences and trade shows like the PennAg Expo and Ag Progress Days. These on-on-one consultations were few and far between for the team and relied heavily on plain people’s attendance at such events. During the pandemic, online meetings and outreach efforts left plain people out of the conversation, but localized poultry disease issues were still circulating. The Hotline

TABLE 2: EQUINE TEAM POSTS & CALL VOLUME (2021)

Week	Date	Topic	Calls
4*	2/01	Importance of Having Water Access	3
5	2/08	Forage in Winter	5
6	2/15	Blanketing Tips	4
7	2/22	Facilities	9
8	3/01	Basic Nutrition	5
9	3/08	Core Vaccines	6
10	3/15	Rain Rot and Scratches	17
11	3/22	Thrush	14
12	3/29	Choosing Hay	26
13	4/05	Small Strongyles	19
14	4/12	Fly Control	13
15	4/19	Foaling	10
16	4/26	Pasture Management Tips	10
17	5/03	Feeding Fat	13
18	5/10	Sweat – Electrolytes and Hydration	7
19	5/17	Sweet Itch	9
20	5/24	Buttercups in Pastures	6
21	5/31	Temperature, Pulse, Respiration	16
22	6/07	Assessing Health	5
23	6/14	Keeping Your Horse Cool	7
24	6/21	Manure Management	6
25	6/28	Feeding Protein	8

*The Equine Team did not begin messages until February 1, 2021; week numbers are consistent with the Dairy Team’s timeline

provided an avenue for engagement with these audiences.

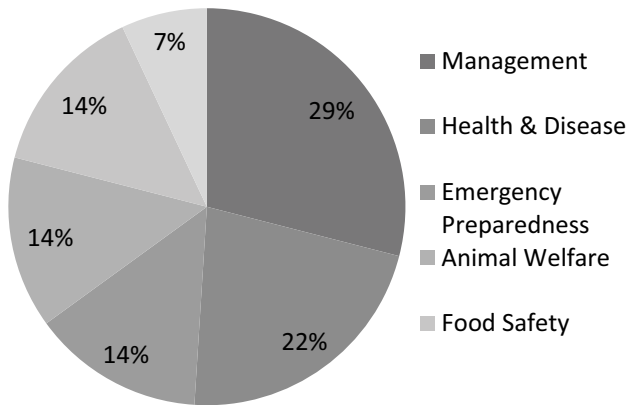
The Poultry Team understands that many families’ and communities’ years of poultry production experience extends beyond the team’s. Many communities have been producing poultry meat and eggs without any Extension intervention. However, the team saw a need to increase

biosecurity efforts, decrease risk of contamination leading to food borne illness, and maintain excellent standards of animal welfare.

The Poultry Team received three return calls as a result of the hotline messages. All three were regarding legality of selling meat and eggs on the farm in Pennsylvania.

The team reassessed their efforts at the end of May 2021. They concluded that through the busy spring, summer and early fall, the team would take a break from messages. This break provided the team with time to pre-record more messages and bank them for future use. The team plans to reinstate their messaging the first week of October 2021 and continue through June 2022.

FIGURE 4: CALLS BY TOPIC, POULTRY HOTLINE



Livestock Team Extensions

The Penn State Extension Livestock Team utilizes three different phone lines, for beef, sheep and goats, and swine; the most recent addition to the Livestock Team’s Animal System’s Hotlines is the swine line, which does not have enough data

to report at this time. The goal of this Extension is to provide information to entry-level producers. Complex topics are broken into multiple recordings, beginning with foundational learning, then followed by a recording that can provide learning opportunities for both entry-level and veteran producers. The Beef Extension provides information for both feedlot and cow/calf producers. Beef producers have the ability to listen to various health, nutrition, reproduction, and general managerial topics. Table 4 lists the topics offered during the first 22 weeks of the phone line. Figure 5 suggests that nutrition/grazing and reproduction hold the most interest to listeners. The first recording, about crossbred beef-x-dairy hybrids, has been the recording with the greatest number of calls (nearly 50), which can be linked to Pennsylvania’s large dairy industry.

TABLE 3: POULTRY TEAM POSTS & CALL VOLUME (2021)

Week	Date	Topic	Calls
7*	2/22	Brooding Chicks	6
8	3/01	Storm Water Issues & Poultry Housing	4
9	3/08	Animal Welfare	5
10	3/15	Buying Chicks	15
11	3/22	Egg Food Safety	11
12	3/29	Species Separation for Biosecurity	12
13	4/05	Selling Poultry Meat Under the USDA Exemptions	14
14	4/12	Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats Analysis	6
15	4/19	Feeding for Stage of Life	4
16	4/26	Who to Call in an Emergency	4
17	5/03	Summer Ventilation	4
18	5/10	Nest Box Management	3
19	5/17	Where to Get Help with Poultry Diseases	2
20	5/24	Coccidiosis	n/a

*The Poultry Team did not begin messages until February 22, 2021.

The week numbers are consistent with the Dairy Team’s timeline.

FIGURE 5: CALLS BY TOPIC, BEEF HOTLINE

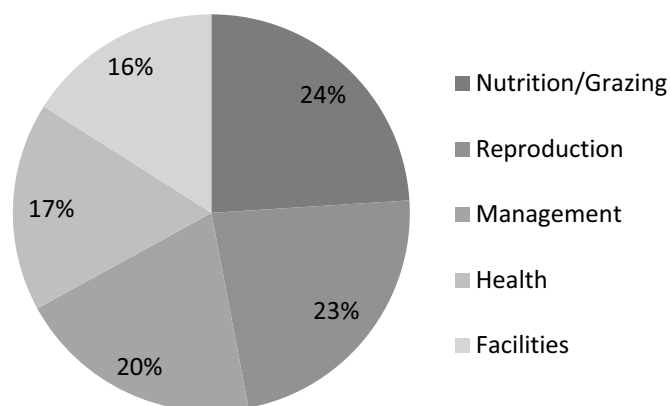


FIGURE 6: CALLS BY TOPIC, SHEEP AND GOAT HOTLINE

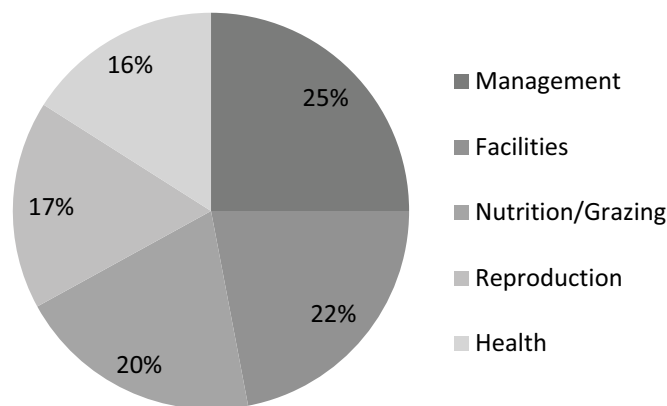


TABLE 4: LIVESTOCK TEAM POSTS (2021): BEEF TOPICS AND SHEEP & GOAT TOPICS

Week	Date	Beef Topic	Sheep and Goat Topics
1	1/11	Finishing Crossbred Beef-x-Dairy Calves	Winter Housing #1- Thermal Neutral Zone
2	1/18	Stretching your Winter Hay	Winter Housing #2- Winter Housing Req.
3	1/25	Winter Planning Recommendations	Late Pregnancy Nutrition
4	2/01	Contract Selling Cattle	Preparing for Lambing/Kidding
5	2/08	Heavy Use Area Pad - Part 1	Signs of Lambing/Kidding
6	2/15	Heavy Use Area Pad - Part 2	Metabolic Diseases from Kidding/Lambing
7	2/22	Gut Health	Why is Colostrum so Important?
8	3/01	The Importance of Minerals - Part 1	Weaning Strategies for Lambs and Kids
9	3/08	The Importance of Minerals - Part 2	Sheep Records: The Key to Profitability
10	3/15	Using Expected Progeny Differences for Bull Selection (1)	Culling Strategies
11	3/22	Using Expected Progeny Differences for Bull Selection (2)	Staying Safe through Kidding/Lambing
12	3/29	Integrating Grazing into Cropping Systems	Solar Farm Sheep Grazing
13	4/05	Feeding Antibiotics (Ionophores)	Pasture Prevention of Internal Parasites
14	4/12	Ticks and Cattle and People	Managing Parasites with Good Nutrition
15	4/19	Fly Control - Confined Cattle	Determining the Most Efficient Female Size
16	4/26	Fly Control - Pastured Cattle	Biosecurity Risks in Small Ruminants
17	5/03	Beef Quality Assurance	Reproductive Programs that are Common
18	5/10	Pink Eye	Disease Transmission during Breeding
19	5/17	Heat Detection	Grass Tetany
20	5/24	Facilities	Temporary Fencing
21	5/31	Reproductive Programs That Are Common	When to Rotate Pastures
22	6/07	Grazing Summer Annuals	I pick that one! Sheep Selection Tools

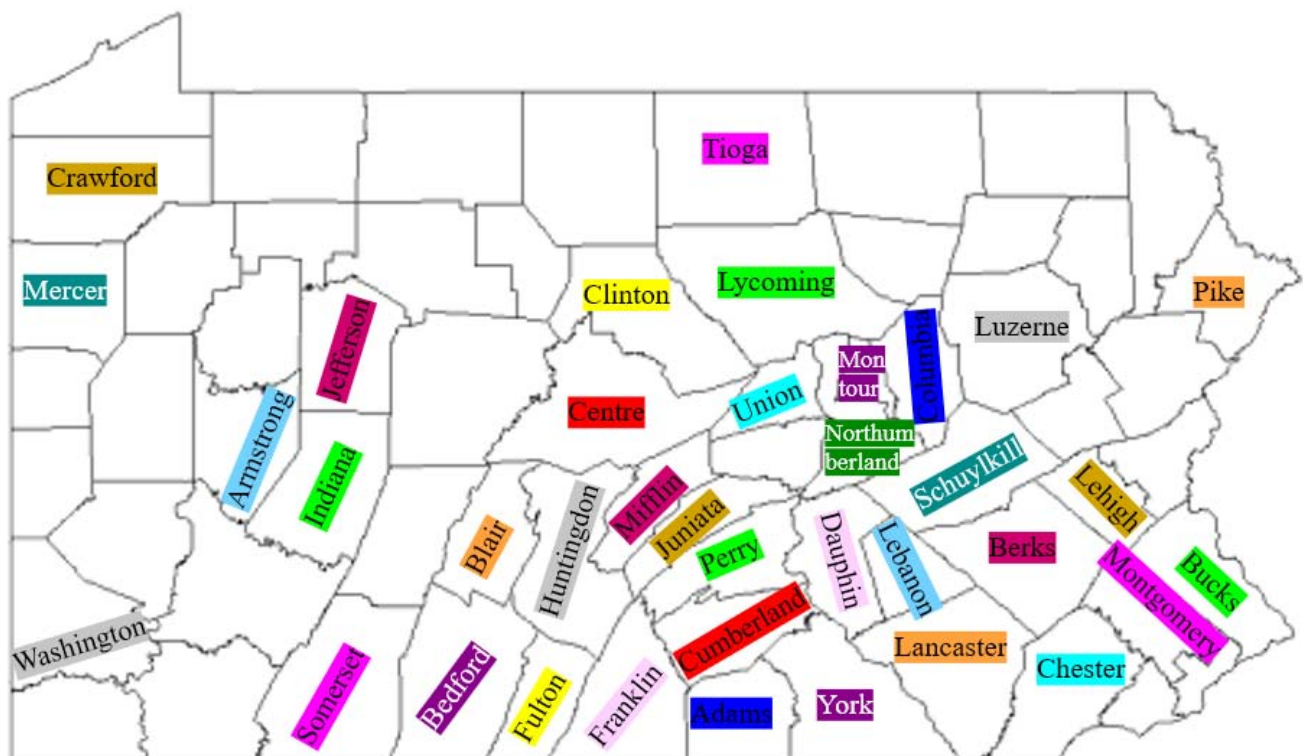
The Sheep and Goat Extension focuses on breeding stock. Topics offered include nutrition, reproduction, and health management (Table 4). Similar to the Beef line, recordings provided information to entry-level producers and built on foundational topics to provide learning opportunities to both entry-level and veteran producers. These recordings provide the listener with the Penn State Extension educator's name, the topic being discussed, and a contact number for additional information. Figure 6 shows that management, facilities, and nutrition/grazing are the topics that generate the most interest. Solar farms are a growing, upcoming industry in Pennsylvania, so the topic "solar farm sheep grazing" has been the recording with the greatest number of calls for the Livestock Team. In total, the sheep and goat extension has had 527 calls over 22 weeks, so the Livestock Team views the sheep and goat extension as an essential tool to educate producers through COVID-19 restrictions.

Although the recently added Swine Extension does not have outreach numbers to report, the focus of the line is to provide information to producers who are breeding and/or finishing swine. Future topics will include reproduction, facility

requirements, and disease control. Every producer will know the name of the Penn State Extension educator speaking in the message. The topic, and concluded with a phone number for additional information. The addition of the swine extension provides plain swine producers with educational material that is well-needed.

Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, the Livestock Team focused on utilizing in-person events and on-farm visits to convey educational material to producers. With travel and in-person events being restricted, most educational information has been limited to webinars, phone diagnosis, and online articles and fact sheets. Advertisement for the phone line consists of a business card with the available extensions and the phone number. Business cards were left in common places of business such as feed and seed dealers and given to industry professionals to pass along to their clientele. In the future, the Livestock Team plans to add quick advertisements for in-person events as part of their 5-minute recording.

FIGURE 7: PENNSYLVANIA COUNTIES (37 OF 67) WITH CALLS TO THE HOTLINE



DISCUSSION

Hotline Outreach

The Hotline (across all animal Extensions) has been successful in reaching producers from 37 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania (Figure 7) and has even had calls from people in other states including Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Florida, Virginia, Illinois, Texas, and North Carolina. The Animal Systems Team has considered this method of reaching producers a success and will continue to market the Hotline to reach as many producers as possible.

Challenges & Advice Moving Forward

Some challenges emerged through the development of the Animal Systems Hotline. One challenge the Poultry Team faced was sustainability and relevance of fresh messages. Some coordination, assignment, and whole team effort will be needed for the Poultry Extension to continue in the future. A challenge that the Livestock Team faces with the Hotline is variation in call volume, which could be connected to good weather when farmers are working in their fields. Another challenge is being able to collect data to determine an economic impact from the recordings. At this time, no producers have reached out to the Livestock Team for additional information or help on their operation. A good survey method of those who utilize the Animal Systems Hotline is needed to continue to collect data (Table 5).

Advertisement for the Hotline appeared in a regional agricultural newspaper, *Lancaster Farming*, as well as on business cards in local stores that plain people patronize. Additional advertisements for the Hotline were published in an Amish/Mennonite specific advertising periodical called the *Busy Beaver*. In the weeks that advertisements were published in either of these publications, the Hotline

received a higher volume of calls compared to weeks without advertisements. In the future, as COVID-19 travel restriction policies loosen for Animal Systems educators, the goal is to increase advertising and traffic to the Hotline at in-person events and consultations.

Another challenge that the Animals Systems team ran into was that the platform only records the location where the phone number is registered. For example, if someone who is living in Chester County is calling on a cell phone but the phone is registered in Ohio, the data will tell us that someone from Ohio is calling. Another data collection challenge was that, although the Hotline was developed for plain producers, anyone can call into the Hotline and listen to the messages. There is no way to determine if the callers are plain Anabaptist individuals.

The teams plan to utilize the data collected as a form of needs assessment for outreach efforts directed at the plain people. There seems to be high degrees of regionality in the call volumes. As such, focus groups could be organized to investigate the specific needs of the plain people in the southeastern and central valleys in Pennsylvania. Regions with fewer calls may indicate an opportunity for marketing the Hotline to new places. A survey could also be conducted to assess interest in the Hotline and generate topic suggestions.

The Animal Systems Hotline has proven to be a useful tool to reach producers that do not utilize the internet, such as plain people. Continued use of the Animal Systems Hotline is planned as the United States recovers from COVID-19. The pandemic has taught the Animal Systems Team the importance of utilizing unconventional methods for educating producers and being dynamic in the methods used to educate.

TABLE 5. CHALLENGES AND ADVICE MOVING FORWARD WITH THE ANIMAL SYSTEMS HOTLINE

Challenges	Advice Moving Forward
Sustainability and relevance of the messages	Conduct focus groups in high-call volume and low- call volume regions and survey listeners of the messages
Getting the word out	Diversify approaches to getting the word out including newspapers, newsletters, flyers at events and in local businesses, etc.

