Masters position: Environmental enrichment for goats

Institution: University of Guelph

Project Summary: Goats have evolved in challenging natural environments, and thus developed complex foraging, navigating, cognitive and social skills; improving and enriching commercial goat housing promotes the expression of natural behaviours associated with these skills, and ultimately, increases positive welfare. However, the scientific literature examining goat housing improvements is minimal and often poorly designed, and thus lacks on-farm application transferability. Given the inclusion of natural behaviour and enrichment in Canada's National Farm Animals Care Committee's Code of Practice for the Handling and Care of Goats, there is an urgent need to systematically review enrichment options, and surveying goat producers to understand existing enrichment options and their efficacy. The successful candidate for this project will focus on assessing the feasibility of enrichment options across multiple goat farms in Ontario (including milk, meat and fibre goats). From the on-farm work, guidelines and workshops will be produced to assist Ontario producers in meeting the requirements of the Goat Code of Practice.

This position will be supervised by Dr. Tracy Burnett and Dr. Charlotte Winder (University of Guelph) in collaboration with their New Zealand-based colleague, Dr. Gosia Zobel. The candidate will be expected to fulfill course requirements on the main University of Guelph Campus, and is not expected to reside in Ridgetown, ON.

Responsibilities:

- Assist in designing and conducting a study to evaluate housing improvements on commercial goat farms (milk, meat, and fibre) in Ontario.
- Participate in the recruitment of farms, communication with producers, on-farm set up of housing improvement options and goat behaviour recording equipment, and data collection.
- Collaborate with project team to analyze data and draw conclusions.
- Maintain accurate records of experimental procedures, results, and relevant observations.
- Contribute to the preparation of reports, scientific publications, and presentations.

Qualifications:

- Bachelor's degree in Animal Science or related field.
- Strong interest in animal welfare and agricultural research.
- Previous experience working with livestock, particularly goats, is desirable.
- Previous experience with behavioural observations of animals is beneficial.
- Interest in data handling and machine learning techniques is advantageous but not required.

- Excellent organizational and communication skills.
- Ability to work both independently and as part of a research team.
- Full driver's licence.

Duration: Full-time, 2-year Master's degree program.

Proposed start date: January/ May 2025.

Compensation: This project is funded in part by Ontario Agri-Food Research Initiative. A stipend of $24,000 per year for 2 years in available for this project. The student will be required to pay tuition fees according to the University of Guelph's requirements.

Application Instructions: Interested candidates should submit a cover letter, curriculum vitae (CV), unofficial transcripts and contact information for 2 references via email to Dr. Tracy Burnett at burnettt@uoguelph.ca