



Hog Island, Leicester Longwool Sheep Being Preserved

Rare sheep breeds' genetics being conserved by national program. Fewer than 200 of each breed still exist.

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Hog Island Sheep

Courtesy Walnut Hill Farm Two rare breeds of colonial sheep maintained at George Washington's Mount Vernon home, and Colonial Williamsburg, Va., are being preserved, genetically, according to the Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

ARS scientists at the National Animal Germplasm Program (NAGP) in Fort Collins, Colo., are preserving the rare and unique genetic traits of the Hog Island and Leicester Longwool sheep.

Both Hog Island and Leicester Longwool sheep descended from breeds raised during the colonial era, before the advent of modern breeding techniques.

Today, fewer than 200 registered Hog Island sheep remain, 54 of which currently live at Mount Vernon, ARS reports.

Leicester Longwool also are categorized as critical (or having fewer than 200 annual registrations) by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

Hog Island and Leicester Longwool are smaller than modern breeds, with less meat and coarser wool, but they have characteristics that newer breeds lack, according to ARS.

Harvey Blackburn, a NAGP geneticist collected and froze 253 semen samples from 10 Hog Island sheep for the NAGP collection. Blackburn and his colleagues are working obtain germplasm from the Leicester Longwool flock in Colonial Williamsburg; they've already collected 92 blood samples from the flock.

According to ARS, these rare breeds have regional and historical value, but conserving them is particularly important because of their genetic uniqueness.

The sheep germplasm collection was initially set in motion by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, a nonprofit organization established in 1977 with the goal of protecting more than 150 historic breeds of livestock.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association maintains the flocks at Washington's estate and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation operates Colonial Williamsburg. NAGP facilities house germplasm for sheep, cattle, chickens, pigs, aquatic animals and other livestock. The animal collection contains more than 480,000 samples, many donated by livestock producers throughout the United States.

ARS is the principal intramural scientific research agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.