



Cornell Sheep Program People

SUNY Cobleskill Student Leigha LaTourette Expands her Horizons in Cornell's CALS Sustainable Animal Agriculture Internship

Leigha LaTourette, currently a junior majoring in Animal Science in SUNY Cobleskill's BS program spoke about her desire to become a veterinarian. "I grew up on my family's dairy farm near Trout Creek in Delaware County that transitioned three years ago to a beef cattle operation. Caring for animals has been a big part of my life, and I've always loved it. My mom's nursing career, along with the farm, shaped my interest in veterinary medicine. I plan to pursue a career as a large animal vet in my home region."



Always an avid student, LaTourette has also sought learning experiences beyond the classroom. She explained, "In the summer of 2016 I worked for the Watershed Agricultural Program and learned about the science and decision-making process behind the practices that are implemented on farms like ours. I spent several weeks this past summer with Dr. Faith Burns at the Delhi Animal Hospital to learn about the routines of veterinary work. This spring, I was seeking an internship for my degree program that would broaden my experience. I saw a posting for the Cornell CALS Sustainable Animal Agriculture Internship. It caught my eye as a great opportunity and I was really excited when I got accepted. The e-mail I received read, 'Welcome to the Cornell Sheep Program.' That's the one livestock species I have never worked with before, so I was prepared for something new, then I was really surprised when I saw the work was with dairy sheep. I thought "Wow, we're *milking* them?! My family and friends were pretty incredulous about that, too."

Professor Thonney of the Department of Animal Science commented: "The Sustainable Animal Agriculture 2050 Summer Internship program is funded by a grant from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture with our department chair, Dr. Patricia Johnson, as the principle investigator. I was amazed about the comradery and enthusiasm that developed among the nine interns. Leigha became very engaged in our sheep milking project and did an amazing job of analyzing and summarizing factors that contributed to differences in growth rates of the lambs raised on the cold-milk, lambar system."

"Throughout my eight-week internship I worked three days a week with the 36 dairy sheep that are part of the 2-year research project, 'Diet and Management for Milking

**Leigha LaTourette – 2017 Summer Intern
Cornell 2050 Sustainable Animal Agriculture**

Ewes in Short Lactations On the Star System,” LaTourette explained. “The first week we learned the routines of their care, which was a lot of fun. The research is examining the milk production, prolificacy, and lamb survival of non-dairy sheep breeds milked in short lactations. The genetic lines of traditional dairy sheep breeds in the U.S. are limited. If the non-dairy breeds perform well, this study could be a step toward developing cross-breeding programs, so it was a great fit with my interest in genomics. The study also involves feeding three levels of fermentable fiber to groups of 4 ewes in each of 9 lactations, to determine the optimal level for maximum milk, body condition, and health. We learned about the reason for the diets and how the nutrition work applied to the dairy sheep industry. Early on, I started to view the animals in terms of how the diets were affecting the milk production and body condition of each group. The sheep were lambing when we started, and the lambs were being weaned at the end of our internship. It was really exciting to be in the midst of the research as it progressed.”

“Research work was new for me, and there was always support when I had a question,” LaTourette said. She added, “Dr. Thonney really wanted us to learn, and along with the other professors and staff, he was always available to help us understand procedures and the reasons behind them.” LaTourette described her individual project. “I weighed the lambs at birth and then every seven days, recorded the data and analyzed it to determine if their dams’ diets affected their birth weight and rate of gain. We learned that the diets had no impact, but that sex and birth weight did affect rate of gain, as the male lambs had a higher average daily gain than the females.”

Each student presented about their project to the group. LaTourette commented, “Although I was nervous, it was an important experience to have. I learned how to communicate about research work in the process of putting the poster together, too.”

“The internship curriculum covered many research topics and issues in plant and soil science as well as animal science,” she noted. “Each Monday we had a presentation about a particular topic along with assigned reading that we were asked to discuss during the week. That centered us around the topic, and the interaction kept us highly engaged. On Fridays we met as a larger group for facilitated discussion. I loved the seminar format. It was very effective and a really great way to learn.”

The Sustainable Animal Agriculture Internship included excursions away from the Cornell campus. A highlight for LaTourette was the field trip to the Miner Institute in Chazy, NY. “It was amazing to visit a place that has so much ag research history and to learn about the current projects.” Summarizing her internship experience, LaTourette said, “The exposure I got to the career opportunities in Animal Science was very valuable. It’s so important to know what’s out there that you can do, and to make the connections that we did with people from Extension, industry, and the research community. My internship this summer at Cornell broadened my exposure in ways I could not have imagined. I’m really grateful I had the chance to do this.”