

## **Milk production from sheep in European Union countries, with special reference to Greece**

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In the European Union, there are approx. 25 M dairy sheep, from which approx. 2.7 ML of milk are produced annually, around 25% of the world sheep milk production. Most dairy sheep are farmed in Romania, Greece, Italy, Spain and France, with >90% of sheep and milk production. Although dairy farms are managed mostly under the intensive or semi-intensive systems, other types of management are also applied less frequently. Mostly, sheep milk is used for cheese production. Total sheep-milk cheese production from EU countries amounts to approx. 330,000 tonnes annually, almost 50% of the total world production. The most well-known sheep-milk cheeses in Europe are feta (Greece), pecorino (Italy), manchega (Spain) and roquefort (France). There are significant differences between dairy farms and meat-production type farms. These include husbandry parameters, eg use of different animal breeds, as the result of the need to produce high milk yields. Management practices also differ, eg rare use of accelerated lambing systems, due to the need for long lactation periods. Moreover, varying veterinary approaches are also applied, eg requirement for maintenance of milk withdrawal periods. Obviously, farmer priorities also differ, for example in a recent field study in Greece, over 85% of farmers have considered mastitis as the most important disease in their flocks, whilst only 5% have declared perinatal mortality of importance.