



Chamarita Sheep - Conservation of a native sheep breed in Spain

CAP support was used to support the preservation of the indigenous Chamarita sheep breed in La Rioja.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Cervera del rio Alhama, La Rioja, Spain

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P4 - Ecosystems management

Focus Area: Biodiversity's restoration, preservation & enhancement

Measures: M10 - Agri-environment-climate

Funding:	Total budget	151 605.04 (EUR)
	EAFRD	50 535.04 (EUR)
	National/Regional	101 070.00 (EUR)

Timeframe: 2015 to 2023

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Summary

The Chamarita sheep is a native breed of Spain's La Rioja region. It is very well adapted to the harsh habitat and is prized for its high-quality wool, milk and meat. However, being smaller than other common commercial sheep breeds, the Chamarita almost reached the point of extinction in the early 1990s. At that point a long-term preservation effort was launched by an association of Chamarita sheep breeders with support from the regional authorities.

The effort has been successful, and in recent years, CAP support has been used to finance a series of additional activities including the collective management of a Herd Book; support with paternity testing and the provision of genealogical data; the development of inventories, etc.

Project results

Purebred Chamarita sheep now account for around 25% of the entire sheep population of the region, and the AROCHA association are on track to increase the population further in 2023, from 14 to 16 herds.

Lessons & Recommendations

After so many years, the most interesting aspect of this preservation effort is the change in the farmers' mentality. Despite the difficulties, they take pride in maintaining their Chamarita sheep flocks and are committed to ensuring that they become commercially viable.

Context

The Chamarita sheep is a native breed of La Rioja region and is registered in the official catalogue of Spanish Sheep Breeds. The breed is very well adapted to the harsh habitat of the region and is prized for its high-quality wool, milk and meat. Previously in danger of extinction since the 1990s, the breed has become an object of study for the AROCHA association and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Life, Territory and Population, who have undertaken numerous conservation actions.

Thanks to their work, in 2021, the breed represented approximately 25% of the La Rioja region's sheep population, with a total of 14 flocks. This incredible recovery is largely due to a breeding project that took place in cooperation with farmers of the Cornago region (within the Sierra de Alcarama of La Rioja) to establish greater control of cross breeding and ensure the purity of the breed.

Currently, membership of the AROCHA Association is dependent on farmers ensuring that all breeding males are pure Chamarita. This has been a challenging measure for them to adopt because it has initially



meant that their lambs have had a smaller weight and sold for less. The Autonomous Community of La Rioja now offer a small financial contribution to all breeders who join the AROCHA Association.

In 2007, to further support these efforts, a standardised Stud Book was established and all entries are published. This is the first step towards the creation of a Protected Geographical Identification.

Objectives

The aim of this project was to contribute to the ongoing work to conserve the native Chamarita sheep breed of La Rioja. It would further develop flock maintenance practices and increase the Chamarita sheep population. Another objective was to improve the morphological quality of the breed and the degree of purity within the flocks. This is to protect the characteristics that make this breed so successful and resilient in difficult extensive grazing conditions where pasture and rainfall are scarce.

Activities

Continuing to build upon their past actions in pursuit of the same overall goal, AROCHA have carried out a full genealogical control and morphological evaluation of the entire Chamarita population, as well as maintaining the DNA bank of all sires and germplasm (semen and/or embryos).

The tasks that were carried out with support from the 2014-2020 RDP grant included:

- Ongoing management of the Herd Book.
- Actions to support replacement control.
- Administration of paternity tests.
- Gathering and inputting genealogical data.
- Maintaining inventories of purchases and sales.

AROCCHA expects to further increase the Chamarita population from 14 to 16 herds thanks to the addition of another two farmers to the association.

Main results

While the overall population of sheep has declined in the region - down to around 60 000 in 2022 from approximately 120 000 in the early 1990s - the population of pure Chamarita sheep has increased from almost 0% to around 25% of the entire sheep population. With the growth of the AROCHA association and increased recognition of the value of protecting the breed, the initiative is on track to increase the Chamarita population from 14 to 16 herds in 2023.

Key lessons

Traditional livestock farming has a multifunctional character and it contributes to the economic development of rural communities while also supporting the maintenance of agricultural landscapes and their associated biodiversity. In turn, this also contributes to climate regulation (e.g. through carbon sequestration) and the prevention of forest fires.

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Additional information:

n/a

