Present and future of the Florina breed of sheep

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Introduction
The Florina (or Pelagonia) sheep originates from the area of West Greek Macedonia and also from the FYROM district called Pelagonia (where the second name comes). It is an average to long body size sheep with wither height 63-70 cm and body weight 55-65 kg for ewes and 75-82 cm, 80-85 kg for rams respectively.
According to information we have the breed does not exist any more in the area of Pelagonia. In Greece, up to 2001 there were 3 flocks with Florina sheep, 2 of which with a total of 482 ewes were recognized by the relevant authorities of the Greek Ministry of Agricultural Development and Food. They were registered for financial support because of the defined region of origin (districts of Florina and Kozani). The third, located in the neighboring district of Pella (Animal Research Institute), receives no financial support as ex situ.
The only flock that exists today is the last one. From the other one, private, does not exist any more because the farmer decided not to continue. The second, institutional, was transferred to the Animal Research Institute, because the institution was closing down. So, today there is one flock in the Animal Research Institute, which belongs to the National Agricultural Research Foundation (NAGREF).

Production data.
The size of the flock is about 650 animals 70% of which are ewes. A large number of rams is kept to reduce the ratio of inbreeding increase. Average age of ewe removal from the flock is 48 months (died of any reason) and 39 months (slaughtered). Fourteen ewes over 204 (7%) had more than 7 lactations.
Graph 1 shows the reproduction data of the Florina breed. An 80% of the ewes served lamb every year and all quite the lambs are born alive with an average birth weight of 3.36 kg and weaning weight of 13.7 kg. Although there are no data on meat quality, it is observed that traders offer higher prices for the lambs if Florina lambs are included in the batch.
Graph 2 shows milk production of the 1st parity Florina ewes. As the years proceed and the flock size increases, the number of ewes having a complete lactation record (≥ 90 days in milk) increases compared to the number of ewes lambing and having a lactation yield. Milk production is also increased in the later years perhaps due to a slight selection of rams and planned mating used to avoid if possible inbreeding. What is also important is that the length of lactation has increased considerably.
Graph 3 shows milk production in later lactations. The number of ewes having a complete lactation record (≥ 120 days in milk) increases but it remains much lower than the number of ewes lambing and having a lactation yield. Especially in the period 1997-8 when very few mature ewes had a complete lactation record (3 over 53). But the length of lactation has also increased.
The future.
The Florina sheep is a not much demanding sheep, resistant to the hard mountainous and climate conditions and they can exploit mountain pastures. There are also indications of resistance to the Maedi-Visna disease. In a common flock with the breeds Chios, Vlachiko and crosses Friesian by Chios the Florina had the smallest percentage of seropositive animals and in the application of a sanitation project was the first on to become seronegative.
The breed under a good management could increase in size and production. This combined with its lower demands, compared with the productive breeds, and the resistance to environment conditions and diseases could make it an important breed for the Greek West Macedonia and other Balkan countries like FYROM.
But, as it has been already pointed out, the only flock that exists today is the one not supported by the State, with the excuse that it is not in the area of the origin. This shows an absolute neglect of the responsible body for rare breed reservation. Without any financial support the Animal Research Institute, facing a lot of financial and staff problems, will not be able to keep the flock for a long time as did the other institution. Apart of that, there is always the danger of loosing the last flock for other reasons (e.x. disease). At least one more flock should be created somewhere else. Where else is the question.
We believe that a national reservation park for rare breeds of productive animals in danger has to be created. Use of modern installations and machinery would reduce considerably human work, which is the main component of the cost. This park could attract young candidate farmers and students. During their practice they could offer work without extra payment. The park could finance part of its cost by selling its products like milk, lambs, experimental animals, etc. Then, the State will have to provide only the rest of the cost.

Graph 1. Lambing data of the Florina sheep