Do farmers really want to eradicate sheep lice?

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By Chris Hawkins

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With the termination of Western Australia's Sheep Lice Eradication Campaign in 1993, farmers' views about the eradication of sheep lice are of greater relevance now than in the past. Lice control now rests with individual farmers and continuing local lice cell groups.

A recent survey of producers in the Moora Shire provides some key insights into farmers' thoughts about sheep lice and their eradication.

About the survey

Fifty-three of the 162 producers in the Moora Shire were interviewed (33 per cent) in 1991-92 about sheep lice and related matters. The aim of the survey was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which farmers respond to problems and situations in relation to sheep lice, how strongly their opinions were held, and where management for lice was rated in the overall priorities of farm operations.

Trained interviewers were used; interactions between interviewer and farmer were standardised by the use of information cards. Interviewers were not told whether properties were infested with sheep lice or not.

Farmers were also asked about their educational background, their spending priorities, and their sources of information about farm activities.

The survey indicated that farmers believe sheep lice can be eradicated from their flocks.
What we found
Most farmers surveyed (96 per cent) were male and 40 to 49 years old. Most were the sons of farmers (92 per cent), had been farming for about 26 years, and had at least high school education. Most were married (82 per cent), and their wives were of similar educational background. For the most part, wives played little or no role in animal health and management decisions.

Farms were mostly mixed cropping and sheep. Cropping was the major source of income on 50 per cent of farms, and sheep on 35 per cent. Cropping and sheep were about equal in value on 13 per cent. Cattle were kept on 25 per cent of farms.

Most farmers (87 per cent) said that they had seen lice on sheep, though few were confident about how to find them. Many were confused about the signs of lice infestation, and how lice spread.

Most (83 per cent) felt that the loss of wool production from lice-infested sheep was greater than the cost of treatment, and 42 per cent were prepared to treat sheep each year regardless of whether they thought sheep had lice or not.

There was some confusion about the commercial methods of detecting sheep lice in wool. Most farmers doubted the reliability of the lice detection test, as performed by wool testing laboratories, and 55 per cent considered that a Department of Agriculture stock inspector was more reliable at detecting lice.

Seventy-seven per cent of farmers felt that backline products would not reliably eradicate lice from an infected flock. Their responses were made before resistance to synthetic pyrethroids was confirmed. Of those who treated sheep for lice, 77 per cent were using backline treatments. There was a low level of concern about chemical residues in wool resulting from lice treatments, or the possibility of rejection of the clip by international buyers.

Did farmers want to eradicate sheep lice?
The response was a very sound yes, with 82 per cent clearly in favour of eradication. Ninety-two per cent of farmers surveyed wanted the sheep lice eradication campaign to continue, irrespective of shortcomings in the lice detection test, and 94 per cent wanted to continue eradication, despite the rural downturn.

Did farmers believe that it was possible to eradicate sheep lice?
Ninety-six per cent of tanners believed that sheep lice could be eradicated from their farms. Furthermore, 71 per cent felt that lice could be eradicated from the shire, but only 44 per cent felt that statewide eradication was an achievable goal.

Farmers suggested that stumbling blocks to eradication might be:
- spread of lice through saleyards (17 per cent);
- sheep traders selling infested sheep (38 per cent);
- split shearings making treatments less effective (54 per cent);
- depressed economy, which discourages farmers spending money on lice treatments (33 per cent);
- chemicals not working (33 per cent); and
- hobby farmers, who may not treat sheep for lice (71 per cent).

Some farmers commented that the difficulty of mustering sheep in pastoral regions could be a problem.

Did farmers consider that there was a better way to manage the lice eradication campaign?
Farmers did not think there was a better way to manage the sheep lice eradication campaign. Eighty-seven per cent wanted the Department of Agriculture to continue its involvement, and 92 per cent wanted the same or greater input from the Department.

Funding the campaign was somewhat contentious, with 39 per cent wanting a user-pays approach whereby those with lice paid for eradication, and 46 per cent wanting an...
industry-funded approach based on a levy on wool sold. Most (71 per cent) felt that the compulsory levy was set at the right amount.

One of the key elements in the eradication campaign was the establishment of Lice Liaison Committees and cell groups to manage lice eradication at the local level. However, only 56 per cent of the farmers interviewed knew of Lice Liaison Committees, or could name a member. Farmers generally felt that the Lice Liaison Committees should have an advisory and educational role, such as organising field days on lice treatments. Half of the farmers felt that committees should also have the power to quarantine infected farms.

Where should we go from here?
If the farming community of the Moora Shire is generally representative of that of Western Australia, then there is good news.

Producers don’t want sheep lice on their properties, and consider that lice are worth eradicating despite the downturn in the rural economy, and any shortcomings in our ability to detect lice.

Farmers believe that sheep lice can be eradicated from their farms. These views could be strengthened by highlighting successful eradication efforts, and providing information on new ideas through farmers’ usual information sources - rural press, radio, television and Department of Agriculture publications such as Ag Memos.

Farmers are also concerned about the risk of spread of sheep lice through saleyards and introduced sheep, sheep traders, split shearings, hobby farms, and the efficacy and use of chemicals.

Although farmers’ spending priorities do not favour eradication of sheep lice, the actual cost of lice may be similar to that of blowflies and worms.

It is also important to overcome misconceptions about sheep lice, and to down-play the social stigma associated with sheep lice infestations. This may enhance the ability of rural communities to deal with sheep lice.

The task of lice control now rests with individual farmers and continuing local lice cell groups. If the issues raised through this survey are addressed, and if the positive attitudes towards eradication of sheep lice already present amongst producers is encouraged, the prevalence of lice could be reduced to a low level, and possibly even eradicated.

Where do farmers get farm-related information?
Several sources of information were used by farmers, including radio (89 per cent), television (60 per cent), rural magazines and newspapers (98 per cent). Ninety per cent of farmers attended one or more field days in the preceding two years; 46 per cent attended Department of Agriculture field days.

Animal health precautions
Although all farmers reported sheep straying onto their farms, few took specific action to prevent the spread of sheep lice in their flocks following the detection of strays or the purchase of new animals. Most farmers bought one mob of sheep per year and sold on two occasions. Eighty-six per cent of farmers bought rams from local studs.

Where does expenditure on animal health, and lice in particular, fit into the farm’s overall priority?
When farmers were asked how further funds, if available, would be spent on the farm, their overwhelming response was on conservation and land care (96 per cent). Internal fencing rated second (81 per cent). Only 6 per cent of farmers indicated specific spending on animal health.

Social activities, fertiliser and chemicals, capital items, and debt servicing all rated higher than animal health. Priorities associated with sheep lice were not mentioned.

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