Careful clip preparation will increase profit

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The current wool market has forced wool growers into producing the maximum number of kilograms of quality wool for the least cost. Preparation of the clip is now much more important to maximise possible net returns. Careful clip preparation will ensure that growers receive the maximum overall average price for each kilogram of wool in the clip.

**Differences in profitability**

The key to the profitability of any wool clip is the money banked per kilogram of clean wool in the clip, that is the overall average price received for each kilogram of wool in the clip. Strategies adopted at shearing can markedly influence profitability of the clip. The Wool Analysis Centre found that in 1992-93 the top 25 per cent of their clients banked 40c per clean kilogram more (about $1.20 per sheep shorn or $50 per bale) than the 25 per cent of clients with the least profitable clips. Comparisons were made on clips of similar micron, vegetable matter and top making style.

When the most profitably prepared clip was compared with the least profitably prepared clip, and these clips were of similar micron and sold at the same time, the best clip banked about $100 per bale more than the least profitable clip. Clip preparation strategies adopted by top producers demonstrate thrift without compromising the preparation standards set out in the industry code of practice for clip preparation.

The most profitable clips have:
- a high proportion of the clip sold as fleece wool and
- low marketing costs.

**Fleece wool**

Lines of fleece wool command higher prices than any other line of wool. Wool that is unnecessarily removed from the fleece into another non fleece line incurs a price penalty. For example, every kilogram of fleece wool that is unnecessarily skirted off and put in the pieces will lose 15 per cent of its value (see Table 1).

**Net returns**

Minimising marketing costs will improve the profitability of the clip. Marketing costs include pre-sale testing charges, insurance, brokerage fees, rehandling charges (bulk class, interlotting, reclassing weight adjustment) and delivery costs to dump or scour. In 1993, these costs ranged from 19c per clean kilogram (13c greasy) to 32c per clean kilogram (19c greasy). The difference is almost 40c per sheep shorn or $15 per bale.

Clips with low marketing costs per kilogram of clean wool have a small number of large-lines with a minimum of bulk class or interlot bales. Wool bales are packed to an average of 185-190 kg. Well bred, well managed and carefully prepared clips have minimum testing, rehandling and delivery costs.

**Wool characteristics are variable**

Most of the characteristics of wool, for example fibre diameter, staple strength, staple length, are highly variable within any fleece.

### Table 1. Approximate relative value of fleece components (on clean price basis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fleece wool</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines of fleece</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellies</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stain</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locks</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulk class</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Specialist Sheep and Wool Extension Officer, Department of Agriculture, South Perth
2. Manager, Wool Analysis Centre, Belmont
Fibre diameter can vary from:
- 20.5–23.0 micron across different sites on a fleece
- 15.0–25.0 micron for sheep within a mob

However, 50–60 per cent of the variation in fibre diameter occurs between fibres within the staple.

Staple length can vary from:
- 60–72 mm over a medium wool Peppin fleece
- 65–105 mm average fleece length over a mob

But there is much more variation in fibre length within a staple (up to 50 mm) than there is across the mob.

Staple strength can vary from:
- 18–29 newtons per kilotex over a tender fleece
- 32–39 newtons per kilotex over a sound fleece
- 7–40 newtons per kilotex within a mob (tender clip)
- 17–50 newtons per kilotex within a mob (sound clip)

This large variation has been recognised in the code of practice and the classer need only separate the distinctly different fleeces. This helps build large lines of wool for sale. In flocks of mixed breeding and variable wool lengths a larger number of lines will be necessary.

**Presenting sheep for shearing**

The goal of shearing should be to maximise the returns from the clip that has been grown over 12 months, and the manner in which the sheep are presented for shearing will influence the profitability of the clip.

Sheep should be of similar wool type. Weaners must be removed from ewes before shearing.

Sheep should be presented clean, dry and free from stain. They should be crutched within three months of shearing. Professional wool producers 'key hole' crutch before shearing to remove all dag and urine stain.

The key hole crutch ensures locks are kept to a minimum 3–4 per cent of the entire adult clip. The proportion of locks, however, often amounts to 5–6 per cent of the clip, and this represents a loss of 30c per sheep. A large crutch with a blow above the tail contributes to excessive locks.

**Mob order**

Rams in full wool should be shorn first and the fleeces set aside for merging on merit with other fleece wool as shearing progresses. Selling rams' wool of 10–12 months growth as a single bale or worse, a butt, will result in a lower price for this valuable wool. Rams' wool should match ewe or wether lines. If it does not, then breeding strategies should be reassessed.

Clip test results and wool types from previous shearings will show which mobs are most likely to have matching wool characteristics. Wether wool will frequently match ewe wool, more particularly in autumn-shorn, spring lambing flocks.

**Speed of shearing**

The pace of shearing should be matched to the capacity of the shed staff and classer, to properly deal with each fleece.

Since 85–90 per cent of the value of the clip is in the fleece lines, most effort should be put into the proper and thrifty skirting of each fleece. It takes more time to skirt a fleece lightly and properly than it does to 'rip the skirt off'.

If fleeces are consistently put 'aside' before being thrown, the rate of shearing will have to slow down or the returns from the clip will be compromised.
Sheep of a similar type grazed under similar conditions produce fibres with similar profiles. Lines should be set accordingly, with long main lines of AAAM and small lines of BBB, AAAE, AAM to accommodate the distinctly broad, tender or short fleeces. Lines from different mobs of the same breed and run under similar conditions can be combined provided that they have similar staple crimp, fibre diameter and staple length.

Bulk class and interlots
About 1 per cent bulk class is usual in most clips to accommodate cast fleeces—fleeces that won’t fit into any other lines. To ensure a 1 per cent level of bulk class, plan the filling and pressing of bales long before the whole mob is shorn (cut out) to ensure single bales or butts do not occur. This means pressing bales heavier or lighter so that three-bale lines are established where possible.

Preparing the fleece
All fleeces must be skirted carefully and correctly, and all stain, fribs, jowls, short wool and skin pieces removed, to leave a uniform fleece.

Tip
It takes time to remove stain during shearing. Stain is best removed by crutching within three months before shearing.

Careful, thrifty skirting helps ensure that as much of the clip as possible is sold as fleece wool. Working to a predetermined skirting ratio can be dangerous because it may jeopardise the thoroughness of skirting. Buyers inspecting fleece lines with sweats and fribs left in may suspect inadequate attention was given to removal of urine stain. This could reduce the price bid for the wool.

Tip
A handful (not an armful) of wool off each side of the fleece should contain all the skirtings.

Some shearers use the short cut belly removal technique. This method leaves belly wool on the fleece, which then requires additional skirting. This additional belly wool increases the risk of stain remaining in the fleece wool. Observe each shearer’s technique.

Dermo (DER), cotted fleeces (A COM) and colour (AAAC for unscourable colour) should be removed to an appropriate line and the remainder of the fleece classed normally. Remember that all these fleece lines attract a price penalty. Leaving unaffected fleece wool in these lines reduces clip profits.

Seedy clumps of vegetable matter should be removed from all fleeces. Fleece wool with heavy vegetable fault should be classed in the AAAB line, the new description for this fleece wool. Analysis shows that wool skirted because of apparently higher vegetable matter content is frequently unnecessarily removed from the fleece. It is the average vegetable percentage in the line of wool that matters. Skirting for vegetable matter has minimal effect on the average percentage of vegetable matter in most fleece lines. Locks are fleece wool cut in half and result from second cuts or excessive crutching. Key hole or bung hole crutching is recommended to overcome the amount of locks. Shearers should be encouraged to do a professional job or leave second cuts for next year’s wool harvest.

Setting the lines
Sheep of a similar type grazed under similar conditions produce fibres with similar profiles. Lines should be set accordingly, with long main lines of AAAM and small lines of BBB, AAAE, AAM to accommodate the distinctly broad, tender or short fleeces. Lines from different mobs of the same breed and run under similar conditions can be combined provided that they have similar staple crimp, fibre diameter and staple length.
Comparables—unless the net returns for
the clip can be compared against those from
similar clips (that is similar micron, vegetable
matter and style), it is not possible to
gauge the level of improvement that can be
achieved. Similarly, it will not be possible to
determine if net returns have been improved
from year to year.

Independent—analyses prepared by wool
brokers may not be able to comment on the
net return relative to the rest of the industry
since their database consists solely of their
own clients. Wool growers often choose to
sell through several outlets and the analysis
prepared by a broker may be incomplete.

Constructive—the clip analysis should
advise what can be done to increase clip
returns where ever the profitability of the
clip is lower than should have been ex-
pected.

A clip can be analysed once it has been sold.
Regular clip analysis can help wool growers
maximise the returns for their clip, which
has taken 12 months to grow and minutes to
package and market.

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**Table 2. Comparison of characteristics of the
most profitable and least profitable adult
clips in the Wool Analysis Centre data base**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most profitable</th>
<th>Least profitable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>per cent fleece wool</td>
<td>78–82</td>
<td>68–72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per cent pieces</td>
<td>8–10</td>
<td>12–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per cent bellies and stain</td>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>7–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per cent bulk class</td>
<td>0.5–1.5</td>
<td>3–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average bale weight</td>
<td>185 kg</td>
<td>150–180 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average lot size (approx. 100-bale clip)</td>
<td>8–10 bales</td>
<td>4–6 bales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing costs (not incl. wool tax)</td>
<td>19–20c/clean kg 28–32c/clean kg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>