Careful clip preparation will increase profit

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By Peter Metcalfe and Ric Collins

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 wool</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oddments</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pieces</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellies</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stain</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locks</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulk class</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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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 classifier 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.

Crutching within three months of shearing means that the wool which regrows will be classed into locks. This reduces the need to skirt the breech end for short staple wool.

**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 classifier, 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 skirtng 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.
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.

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.

Many aspects of clip profitability are sacrificed in sheds in which the speed of shearing continually exceeds the capacity of the wool room staff. Clips from sheds suffering from such 'wool storms' have incurred penalties of $1–2 per sheep shorn.

- Tip If you have a four-stand shed, consider using three shearers and the same number of shed staff as for four shearers to ensure the clip is skirted lightly. Do frequent checks on the number of bales of pieces to fleece wool.

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Comparability—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 data base 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 expected.

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.

### Bale weights

An economical bale weight is 185–190 kg average over the entire clip. Clips with light average bale weights incur extra costs for wool packs, transport to brokers’ store, presale testing charges, and delivery to dump or scour. A reduction of 5 bales in 100, and hence a saving of $75–100 can be achieved by lifting average bale weights from 175–185 kg.

### Comparison of clips

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

To maximise clip profits, wool growers must pay attention to all factors that influence the net returns for the clip, not just the amount of fleece wool sold.

**Clip analysis — a useful management tool**

A comprehensive clip analysis should show producers how to improve the net returns from their wool clip.

A useful clip analysis should be:
- Consistent—that is, the same clip components are analysed each year. Ideally this is the adult clip with fleeces of 10–12 months growth. Analyses which include yearly variables such as lambs’ wool, crutchings and perhaps prem shorn wool cannot be compared from year to year, nor between different producers.

### 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</td>
<td>(approx. 100-bale clip) 8–10 bales</td>
<td>4–6 bales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing costs</td>
<td>(not incl. wool tax) 19–20c/clean kg 28–32c/clean kg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>