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Mark Stevens

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Other on-station activities for wool pastoralists

By Mark Stevens, Executive Officer
Pastoral Wool Industry Task Force

The impact of low wool prices has been most severe on specialist wool growers who have little scope for diversification, particularly those in the pastoral area.

Although there are limited opportunities for new enterprises on all pastoral stations, individual pastoralists are examining other on-station activities to determine which ones might be suitable. In doing so, they are evaluating:

- location (proximity to a major highway or population centre);
- natural attractions (coast, gorges, river, wildflowers);
- natural resources (native fauna and flora); and
- water supply (quantity and reliability of good quality water).

Horticulture

The pastoral wool industry covers a large area and incorporates a range of different environments. For pastoralists who have access to an adequate and reliable supply of good quality water from either a river or an underground aquifer, horticulture may be an alternative.

Although distance from markets is an impediment, some pastoralists are well placed to exploit a climatic advantage, which means their produce matures up to four weeks earlier than produce from traditional horticultural producers in southern areas. Earlier maturing produce has less competition at the market and can usually command a premium price.

Pastoralists are already planting melons, stone fruit, and table grapes. The Department of Agriculture has appointed a horticultural development officer to advise wool pastoralists on horticultural enterprises, and to assist them in establishing and managing these enterprises.

Cattle

Some pastoralists are diversifying into beef cattle production. With the cattle industry well established in Western Australia’s northern regions, this venture probably represents the least amount of change.

However, a station needs adequate fences and yards to run cattle and their establishment can be costly. New capital works are usually not justified by the current returns for pastoral cattle.

Domesticated goats

Feral goats are a severe problem on many stations, but some pastoralists are turning this problem to their advantage by establishing a domesticated goat enterprise. On stations where goats can be adequately contained and managed, there is an opportunity to develop a new industry provided suitable export markets can be found.
Emus

Emu farming in this State is controlled by licences and the taking of birds from the wild is prohibited. Some pastoralists have been granted licences and have committed substantial resources to the development and operation of an emu enterprise. However, the emu industry is facing an uncertain future at this time.

The lifting of Eastern States restrictions on raising emus commercially has created a demand for breeding stock, and this has caused the price to rise in Western Australia and has increased returns to growers. Oil is the main product from emus, and the rapid build-up in the number of commercial producers worldwide (relative) to the growth in demand for emu products is a cause for concern.

Sandalwood

The sandalwood species (Santalum sticatum) native to the pastoral region is slow growing and takes about 90 years to reach economic pulling size. The Department of Conservation and Land Management's view is that it has no commercial potential. However, some pastoralists have been successful in obtaining licences to harvest sandalwood, which grows naturally on their leases.

Quandongs

There is a high demand and good prices are paid for dried quandong fruit (Santalum acuminatum) and CSIRO has recently completed a 13-year project to select better varieties. Propagation has struck some March 1992. Although the human consumption market for kangaroo meat is small, demand is slowly increasing. If a significant export market develops, the returns to kangaroo suppliers are likely to increase and the industry could become attractive to pastoralists. However, this is likely to take some time.

Tourism

Host tourism (farmstay, bed and breakfast) in the pastoral regions is increasing. The increased popularity of four-wheel-drive vehicles, an increased awareness and appreciation of the Australian environment, and a desire to experience a different lifestyle, have all resulted in more people heading for the pastoral regions for their holidays. The most successful stations have unique attractions — river, gorges, coast, ranges — and something tourists can do while they are there. A tourism venture requires a long term commitment and a change of lifestyle for the pastoralist, but can bring its own rewards, as well as a much needed alternative source of income.

Host tourism enterprises being established by pastoralists range from homestead accommodation for couples and singles with all meals provided, self-contained chalets for families, and dormitories for large groups. Activities include tours of the station, horseback riding, nature walks, assisting with station work, and water sports where available.

Natural resources

When looking for suitable alternative enterprises, the best place to start is the resources already on the station. Two obvious ones are the kangaroo and the emu. Native timber and native fruits are also promising.

Kangaroo meat for human consumption

Kangaroo meat is high in protein and low in fat and cholesterol. The Western Australian Government lifted the ban on the sale of kangaroo meat for human consumption in December 1992. Although the human consumption market for kangaroo meat is small, demand is slowly increasing. If a significant export market develops, the returns to kangaroo suppliers are likely to increase and the industry could become attractive to pastoralists. However, this is likely to take some time.

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Although few pastoralists use objective management when culling ewe hoggets, those that have been using fleece weight to aid their culling decisions are seeing improvements in the quantity and quality of wool produced.

Reproductive management
Reproductive performance varies considerably across stations and management of rams and ewes before and during joining can improve productivity. Supplementary feeding of rams before joining, the introduction of teaser wethers (or a small draft of rams) two weeks before the introduction of the rams to initiate ovulation, and removing all rams five weeks later, are management practices, which when practised together, can improve the reproductive performance of the flock.

Clip preparation
Poor clip preparation and lower returns are still common. Overskirting and overclassing of the clip into too many lines are two common mistakes that reduce the value of the clip and lower the returns.