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MULESING—STILL THE BEST WEAPON AGAINST FLY-STRIKE

By R. A. MILLS, Instructor, Sheep and Wool Branch

IN SPITE of modern chemicals and insecticides, blow-fly strike remains one of the major problems facing sheep farmers today.

In a recent survey conducted by veterinary officers of the Department of Agriculture’s Animal Division, 866 dead sheep were subjected to a post-mortem examination. Almost 17 per cent. had died from the effects of blow-fly strike. Breech strike accounted for more than half of these and body and tail strike for the rest. Breech strike is therefore a major killer of our sheep.

Apart from deaths, blow-fly strike can cause many other losses in sheep flocks. The main effects are a loss of weight which in turn affects fertility, milk production and lamb production. Wool production is reduced, both by contamination from the strike and by a decrease in the actual wool grown.

Blow fly-strike occurs mainly in the moist crutch area of the sheep, both moisture and heat being necessary for fly strike. Crutching the sheep helps to reduce the moisture held by the wool in this area, and insecticides act against the fly itself. However, both these treatments have only temporary effects.

The sheep blowfly, in common with many other insects, can develop a tolerance to insecticides. Because of this, mulesing remains the most efficient and only long-term means of controlling blow-fly strike.

Mulesing involves removing some of the wool-bearing skin from the crutch area of the sheep. When the cuts heal, the bare skin area around the vulva is stretched and enlarged, making the breech cleaner and drier and therefore less attractive to flies. The protection given by this operation is permanent.

The incidence of fly strike after mulesing wounds heal is almost nil, except in severe fly waves. At such times, temporary measures such as jetting may also be necessary.

It is strongly recommended that mulesing should be a routine part of every flock owner's management, in the same way as marking, crutching and drenching, regardless of the breed of sheep. If there is any breech strike in a flock at all, that flock requires mulesing.

There are a number of trained operators in Western Australia but farmers with limited finance may prefer to perform the operation themselves. Though the operation is simple, farmers should first obtain practical instruction in the correct technique from an experienced muleser.

When to mules

Sheep can be mulesed at any age over three days.

Early mulesing is recommended in order to give the sheep protection for the whole of its life. Mulesing lambs at marking time saves handling and therefore saves costs. Sheep of any breed, of either sex, wrinkly or plain, can and should be mulesed.

Because long wool blunts shears and may obscure the operator's vision, sheep should have less than three week's wool when mulesed.

However, sheep should not be mulesed when flies are likely to be abundant as the wounds are susceptible to fly strike until they heal. Mulesing should not be done in wet, muddy or dusty conditions, or in any other situation where there is risk of infection.
Mulesed lamb in cradle before tail docking

Knife positioned to dock tail to butt (young lamb)

Mules and tail docking operation completed

Hogget, mulesed and tail docked as young lamb

Dirty unmulesed ewe, tail docked to tip of vulva

Clean ewe, mulesed and tail docked as weaner
Where to mules

Sheep should not be mulesed in established yards, as the risk of infections such as tetanus and cheesy gland is high in such places. If possible, sheep should be mulesed on a clean area in the paddock in which they are to run. This saves after-mules droving, which is not recommended. Sheep should not be handled or disturbed for three or four weeks after mulesing.

MULESING METHOD

There are two alternative operations, known as the modified mules and the radical mules. In Western Australia, the modified mules has been used almost exclusively. However, with the breakdown in control given by many of the insecticides used in the Eastern States, the radical operation has become more common there. This new method will probably spread to Western Australia in the future, and farmers should consider using this operation for their young sheep now.

Modified mules

The modified operation consists of removing two crescent shaped pieces of skin, one on each side of the vulva. When the wounds heal, the cut edges of skin on either side of the vulva come together, stretching out and considerably enlarging the bare skin area.

The cuts should start just above and to the side of the butt of the tail, skirting, but not cutting into, the bare skin around the vulva. They are finished by tapering off to a point just above the hamstring. The widest part of the cut should be opposite the vulva. (See illustration).

To obtain maximum stretching and full benefit from the operation, the cuts should not be made too narrow. The shears must not cut into any bare skin. This skin has to stretch to help cover the wounds and it should not be removed.

With the modified mules operation, the tail should be cut off at a point just below the tip of the vulva in ewes, and to the corresponding length in wethers.

In cutting the tail, place the knife edge about half an inch above where the cut will be made. Push the loose skin down to the correct level, fold the tail over the knife, and make the cut. In this way a flap of loose bare skin is left to heal over the stub of the tail.

Tails of this length can brush across the vulva after the ewe has urinated, helping to dry the area. There is ample evidence to show that the tail cut to the tip of the vulva results in the lowest percentage of later fly strike in modified-mulesed sheep.

Tailstripping

Tailstripping is also strongly recommended with the mules operation. This involves removing the woolly skin from the tail, leaving the tail also bare, to give added protection against fly strike.

The cut should start with a sharp-pointed “V” about two inches above the base of the tail. The flap of skin thus formed can then be held in the left hand. Using an upwards sawing action with the lower blade of the shears in the right hand, the strip of wool-bearing skin on the upper surface of the tail can be stripped off in one action. This stripping should extend along the tail beyond where the tail is to be cut off.

Skin on the bare under-surface of the tail should not be removed. During healing, this bare skin is drawn around the tail leaving the whole tail bare.

Radical mules

The radical mules is similar to the modified mules, but an extra piece of skin is removed above the tail. A strip of skin is removed above the butt, the cuts being joined up with the cuts of the modified mules. (See diagram). With the radical mules in very young lambs the tail can be docked close to the butt. This shortens the healing time.

The mulesing wounds heal quickly and provide lifelong protection against fly-strike.

Equipment

Mulesing should be carried out with the sheep held in a crush or cradle fixed to a raised ramp or platform. (See illustrations). Average truck height is suitable. Mulesing from a truck or portable or temporary yards has the advantage that it can be done on clean ground in the paddock in which the sheep are to be run. The sheep should be dropped onto clean straw or bags to help prevent infection.
Long tailed lamb in cradle, "V" cut for start of tail strip. Shears are then turned horizontally and woolled skin removed from upper surface of tail for 2 to 3 inches.

Mules cut started from edge of original "V"; then the shears used with a sliding action, skirt the bare area and remove a strip of woolled skin 1½ to 2 inches wide opposite bare area and tapering to a point about halfway to the hock.

Second mules cut completed as a mirror image of the first.

Tail docked to butt. Optional length tail docked to vulva tip.
Each operator should have two pairs of shears, which should be immersed in antiseptic between sheep. A fine to medium oilstone is also need to sharpen the shears during mulesing. Sharp shears make the job easier and more efficient.

Mulesing shears which are ground, offset and sharpened ready for use, together with mulesing marking cradles as illustrated, are available from local distributors.

In brief . . .

Crutch strike in sheep is still a major problem, but it can be prevented or greatly reduced by the mules operation. Mulesing also makes shearing cleaner and more efficient, and jetting easier.

Mulesing should be carried out on clean ground in temporary yards and preferably in the paddock in which the sheep are to run. The operations should not be carried out in wet, muddy or dusty conditions, or during a fly wave.

Sheep of any age over three days can be mulesed. Mulesing at lamb marking time is recommended as it has these advantages:

• Lambs are light and easy to handle.
• Combining mulesing with other essential procedures such as marking reduces handling and therefore saves costs and time.
• The lambs are protected for life.
• Lambs heal quickly and suffer no greater setback than lambs which are castrated and tail-docked only.

Farmers who intend to carry out the operations themselves should first obtain instruction in the correct procedure from an experienced muleser.

Contact the Sheep and Wool Branch, Department of Agriculture, South Perth, or your district agricultural adviser, for practical instruction and demonstration in mulesing and tailstripping.

DO'S AND DON'TS OF GOOD MULESING

DO . . .

MULES all sheep and lambs at the earliest opportunity.
TAILSTRIP when mulesing.
KEEP SHEARS SHARP for easier operating.
IMMERSE SHEARS (and knives) IN ANTISEPTIC between sheep.
OPERATE ON CLEAN GROUND and destroy all skin pieces daily.
AVOID AFTER-MULES DROVING as much as possible.
DUST WOUNDS with fly repellant powder before releasing sheep if flies are at all active.
OBTAIN COMPETENT INSTRUCTION before starting to mules.

DON'T . . .

Cut into any bare skin when mulesing.
Operate in old yards or pens.
Operate in dusty, wet or muddy conditions.
Operate in the middle of a bad fly wave.
Just sit there—GET STARTED.