A survey of shearing times

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A survey of shearing times

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When do farmers in W.A. shear their sheep, and why do they select the times they do?

A Department of Agriculture survey attempted to answer these questions, which have important implications for the wool industry.

Western Australia has some 33 million sheep, of which about half are shorn in spring—during August, September and October.

This concentration of the shearing season into such a small part of the year has obvious disadvantages, including lack of continuity of employment for shearers and shed hands, a disproportionate number of shearers needed in spring rather than at other times of the year, increased wage rates needed to attract shearers and shed hands into the industry, increased prices paid by growers for transport and marketing systems, and over-investment in wool storage facilities.

The demonstration in the early 1960's that autumn shearing had several advantages prompted the Department of Agriculture to encourage farmers to change to autumn shearing.

The advantages were revealed by time-of-shearing experiments which indicated that autumn shearing reduced the incidence of tender wool from autumn lambing ewes and from whethers run at high stocking rates.

Wool processing results also indicated that autumn-shorn wool performed better during combing operations than spring-shorn wool, Autumn-shorn wools combed into tops with longer fibres and could be spun into stronger yarn.

The reason for such results is the occurrence of the poor autumn feed period in relation to shearing time. Wool growth is restricted during autumn, producing a narrower diameter 'tender' section which occurs at the tip of autumn-shorn fibres but towards the middle of spring-shorn fibres. During carding and combing operations the spring fibres break at the tender point, thus lowering their mean fibre length. With autumn shorn wools the tender tip is lost, along with the weathered tip, as 'noil', leaving sound fibres with longer average length than those of spring shorn wools.*

Despite these arguments for a change in shearing times there has been an apparent increase in the popularity of spring shearing. A survey was therefore conducted to discover why farmers select particular shearing times. The survey was carried out between August and October, 1975.

Four shires were selected for the survey and 25 to 26 farmers interviewed in each. The shires were Mullewa (representing the north eastern wheatbelt), Corrigin (representing the central wheatbelt), Kojonup (representing the medium-high rainfall grazing areas), and Esperance (representing the south eastern agricultural area).

One farmer in five was interviewed in the smallest Shire, Mullewa, while one in 15 was interviewed at Esperance.

Although the shires surveyed carry large numbers of sheep and cover a wide range of environments and farm types, the results should not be used to generalise for the whole State.

Table 1.—Shearing times and percentage of sheep shorn (for each shire) for 101 W.A. farmers in four shires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>Autumn</th>
<th>Winter</th>
<th>Spring</th>
<th>Summer</th>
<th>Split</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mullewa</td>
<td>*9 (37)</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
<td>11 (52)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrigin</td>
<td>2 (13)</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
<td>12 (42)</td>
<td>3 (10)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kojonup</td>
<td>17 (39)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>11 (42)</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperance</td>
<td>3 (23)</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>14 (39)</td>
<td>6 (33)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average sheep shorn % (29) (10) (48) (13)
Average farms % 21 11 48 10 11

* Percentage of sheep shorn by farmers interviewed in shire in 1974 shown in brackets. The percentage figure does not include lambs.
† Autumn percentage for Kojonup was bolstered by one farmer who shored 14 000 sheep.

Times of shearing
Shearing times for farmers in the survey were categorised from the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics' figures for the 1971/72 Agricultural Census. These indicated that 22 per cent of W.A. farmers shored between January and April (defined here as autumn shearing), 13 per cent between May and July (winter shearing), 50 per cent from August to October (spring shearing) and 15 per cent in November or December (summer shearing). Some farmers shored some sheep in two or more of these "seasons".

Shearing times for farmers in the survey are summarised in Table 1. The percentage of sheep shorn on survey farms in each season is shown in brackets for each shire.

Wool quality
Farmers replying to the survey mentioned grass seeds and burr, dust, sand, "bloom" and general appearance, and tenderness, as characteristics affecting wool at different shearing times.

Spring wools were considered to contain less seed and burr by 57 per cent of farmers, 49 per cent said they contained less dust and/or sand, and 32 per cent said they had a better appearance ("bloom"). Tenderness was not mentioned by any spring shearers but 37 per cent of split and autumn shearers considered that autumn shearing reduced the incidence of tender wool.

The incidence of tender wool reported during the survey is summarised in Table 2. Figures in the table indicate that the percentage...
of tender wool expressed as an average over the past five seasons is twice as high with spring shorn wool as with autumn shorn wool.

**Wool price**

Only 19 farmers referred to price when asked about advantages of spring versus autumn shearing. Seventeen of these said that spring clips received a higher price than autumn clips while only two said that autumn wools gained higher prices.

When 59 non-autumn shearers were asked what would happen to their wool price if they changed to summer or autumn shearing, 41 said the price would fall by amounts ranging from 1 to 60 cents per kilogram (clean). Two expected a small rise in price but 16 expected no change.

This fear of lower wool prices may be an important barrier preventing the change from spring to autumn shearing, although 30 per cent of the surveyed farmers now shearing in spring conceded that the value of their wool clip would not fall if they changed to autumn shearing. Even if only this 30 per cent changed from spring to autumn it would bring the percentage of farmers shearing in both seasons (Table 1) to about 36, thus giving a much better monthly spread of shearing than now exists.

**Fly control**

Fifty farmers claimed that spring shearing made fly control easier, while five autumn shearers claimed the reverse.

The fly control programmes of autumn versus spring shearers are compared in Table 3. The figures suggest that autumn shearers rely mainly on mulesing and jetting, while spring shearers rely more on crutching. When it is considered, however, that mulesing and jetting cost less than crutching, and that mulesing costs apply only to lambs, it can be shown that there is little difference between the fly control costs of spring and autumn shearers.

When asked of the effect of changing to autumn shearing, 29 farmers said that more jetting would be necessary for autumn shearing but 49 said that no extra crutching would be needed.

**Shearing costs**

When the 59 non-autumn shearers were asked whether a change to autumn shearing would affect their shearing costs, 49 said the change would have no effect while the remainder were evenly divided over small rises and falls in shearing costs.

The answers suggest that spring shearers do not find it necessary to make "over-award" payments to attract shearers and shed labour during the rush spring shearing period.

**Wet weather delays to shearing**

Wet weather delays were a problem with winter and spring shearing according to 30 winter and spring shearers, while 19 split and autumn shearers regarded lack of wet weather delays as an advantage with autumn shearing.

**Availability of shearers**

Despite heavy emphasis given to the availability of shearers for farmers shearing outside the spring rush period (70 per cent mentioned shearer availability) only 13 spring shearers mentioned difficulty in obtaining shearers. In fact seven spring shearers stated that shearers were easy to obtain, although six of these sheared in August, the beginning of the rush period.

**Other factors**

Ten of the 21 autumn shearers said they preferred their ewes to lamb in short wool and considered this an autumn shearing advantage.

Risk of off-shears deaths was mentioned by only three of the split and autumn shearers and by four others. Off-shears deaths amounted to only 0.2 per cent of all sheep shorn in the shires during 1973 and 1974.

Thirty per cent of farmers considered that hot summer weather made work in the yards and shearing shed unpleasant and was a real disadvantage with autumn shearing. However, 8 per cent thought that the longer daylight hours associated with autumn shearing were an advantage.

**Experience with other times of shearing**

Half the farmers surveyed had had experience with more than one shearing season, although the percentage of spring shearers who had
tried autumn shearing was less than the percentage of autumn shearsers with previous spring shearing experience. The results in Table 4 suggest that opinions expressed by farmers during the survey were based on personal experience rather than hearsay or extension information.

**Intended changes to time of shearing**

Ten per cent of the farmers surveyed intend to change their shearing times, and Table 5 summarises what would happen to the spread of shearing in the sample group if these intended changes were carried out. The data suggests an increase in the number of both autumn and spring shearsers, indicating that the spread of shearing may become even more seasonal in the future.

When asked whether a change to autumn shearing would affect their incomes, 44 of 59 non-autumn shearsers said that they expected a fall in income ranging from $0.03 to $1.20 per sheep. Thus a reason for many spring shearsers not changing to autumn shearing appears to be that they believe they would suffer from lower wool prices and/or higher costs of production, resulting in a consistently lower income.

**Conclusions**

Although spring shearsers appear to be aware of the inconvenience caused by wet weather delays and possible shortage of shearsers during the spring shearing rush, they appear willing to tolerate these disadvantages to avoid what they consider even bigger problems—lower wool prices and more difficult fly control.

Autumn shearsers think that the advantages of shearer availability, fine weather and reduction in tender wool offset their seen disadvantages of seed and dust in the wool, and hot, unpleasant working conditions.

The only indications of any change in shearing time suggest that the monthly spread of shearing will become more uneven as an increasing number of farmers concentrate their shearing into autumn and spring. For those farmers already shearing in spring, the perceived disadvantages of change appear to be the fear of lower wool prices and higher production costs associated with extra fly control measures, although spring shearsers in the survey spent as much on fly control as did autumn shearsers.

It is possible that part of the assumed price disadvantage is associated with the lower yields and therefore lower greasy prices quoted for autumn-shorn wools. This misconception could be eliminated if wool prices were compared on a clean basis.

There is no suggestion that either group of farmers cannot fit their shearing into their ordinary farming programme. It is thus reasonable to conclude that because farmers do not allow shearing to coincide with lambing, seeding and harvesting operations, or with any other operations needing to be carried out on farms, there will always be an uneven spread of shearing with two peaks—one in spring and one in autumn.

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