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New policy hits hard at sheep lice

By F. C. Wilkinson, Division of Animal Health

In March 1977 the regulation requiring compulsory routine dipping of all sheep within 30 days of shearing was changed, and only infested flocks were required to be dipped. This change has allowed concentrated eradication efforts.

Sheep lice are the most serious external parasites infesting sheep in Western Australia. A survey of flocks in the South-West Land Division in 1971 revealed that one in ten properties had infested sheep. This was despite many years of compulsory annual treatment with insecticide (dipping).

The Department of Agriculture therefore began to study the problem and the effectiveness of the policy which relied heavily on annual routine dipping and owners reporting infestations. The main reason lice had not been eradicated, was found to be the difficulty of detecting infestations, controlled by routine dipping, which spread unnoticed to previously free flocks. Added to this about one-third of flocks found with lice failed to eradicate the infestation or became almost immediately reinfested.

Another finding was that dipping was expensive not only because of the cost of the treatment but because of resulting disease such as lumpy wool, arthritis and cheesy gland. It was estimated that, if a farmer did not dip until lice were present (about 100 days after shearing), the loss of income in that year from the infestation would not be as much as the cost of dipping the flock every year.

After discussion with industry representatives the regulations requiring compulsory annual dipping were abolished. Dipping was only required if lice were detected, and infested flocks were to remain in quarantine for at least 100 days after dipping.

It has been feared that some lightly infested flocks where lice had been controlled by inefficient routine dipping, would not dip. These flocks would then become heavily infested, with a consequent large reduction in wool value. However, about 70 per cent of flocks still dipped and the degree of infestation did not change—most had only light infestations.

The number of sheep dipped was higher than expected. However, as confidence in the new programme develops, the percentage of sheep dipped should fall further.

Some farmers saw the apparent increase in lice incidence, indicated by the increased quarantine as a breakdown in the new policy, and reintroduction of compulsory dipping was suggested. However, explanation of the policy has satisfied most objections and at the Annual General Meeting of the Farmers' Union, delegates voted against a motion to reintroduce compulsory routine dipping.

Future

The reluctance of farmers to report lice is disturbing and appears to be due to several reasons including fear of the 100 day quarantine period. However, the benefits of supervised eradication and inspection of neighbouring flocks are now being appreciated and could lead to increased reporting.

If reporting of lice can be increased, detections should again be high in 1978/79 and then gradually decline in succeeding years as further eradication is achieved.

The new programme is continually being monitored and assessed. At this stage it is achieving its aims of decreasing the cost of damage caused by lice to wool and decreasing the major cost of control dipping. Further benefits should accrue as long as all people in the industry accept their responsibility in controlling sheep lice. The full benefits could be expected in about 1982.

Results of new policy

In the first 12 months of the new policy, 800 flocks with lice were detected compared to 300 in the previous year. Most of these infestations were detected by Department of Agriculture stock inspectors at markets and by subsequently tracing movements from and into infested flocks as well as to adjacent farms. Reports of lice infestations by the owner and other persons unfortunately decreased.

In most cases detected, the owner was ordered to shear and dip by a specified date, and at a minimum of 100 days after dipping the sheep were inspected. If no lice were found, sheep were released from quarantine. Only one flock in ten was lice infested after this quarantine period, indicating the benefit of the increased help inspectors gave to owners of infested flocks. Another encouraging fact is that the chance of reinfestation has been reduced. This has been achieved because when an infestation was found, neighbours' flocks were inspected and quarantined if necessary (one in four were quarantined).

Cost savings

Within the first year of the new regulations, about 10 per cent fewer sheep were dipped than in the previous year. This represents three million fewer sheep and a saving of half a million dollars.