1-1-1979

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More lambs by mating weaners

By R.J. Suiter, Sheep and Wool Branch

Farmers can increase sheep numbers by mating ewe weaners. Trials have shown that this does not affect the later performances of these ewes.

As a result of two years of drought in some areas and a strong export demand, sheep numbers in Western Australia fell from 34.8 million in 1976 to 29.8 million in 1978. This export demand for meat and live sheep is likely to increase, but unless the proportion of ewes in the State's flock or the total number of ewes can be increased, the current demand, let alone any increase in demand, will not be met.

One way to help meet the demand for more sheep is to mate ewes as weaners at about 10 to 12 months of age. This could increase the number of lambs for turn-off or, in the case of ewe lambs, increase the size of the breeding flock.

In Western Australia, ewes are usually mated for the first time in their second year (about 20 months of age) because early mating supposedly reduces their future production. This has been disproved in trials by the
Department of Agriculture in which ewes mated as weaners have been compared with ewes first mated in their second year. The effect of the early mating on subsequent production has been monitored.

On Avondale Research Station at Beverley, 100 Border Leicester/Merino cross weaner ewes were joined in January 1965 at an age of seven to eight months. They were rejoined together with another 100 ewes not previously joined, with rams from the original flock, twelve months later and again each year until 1969. Figure 1 shows the lambing results while in Table 1 the production of each group over the five year period is recorded.

Before mating, the weaners that did subsequently produce lambs weighed an average of 38.6 kg whilst those that did not, weighed an average 36.8 kg. At 20 months of age, the ewes first joined as weaners weighed about the same as those first joined at 19 to 20 months.

Another trial with Merino ewes began in 1964 on a private property at Lake Grace and showed similar results (see Table 2). The extra lambs produced from the group joined as weaners resulted from their first mating, and subsequent joinings of the two groups produced the same numbers of lambs. From 20 months of age, weights of the two groups were similar.

Fertility of the ewe weaners depends on age and weight. An older weaner will conceive at a lighter weight than a younger weaner. From trials in Western Australia an indication of the relationship between age and weight has been derived (see Table 3). These trials have shown that the production from ewes at 18 months of age and thereafter is not affected if they conceive as weaners.

As Table 3 shows, the lambing percentages of ewe weaners will be worthwhile when they weigh an average of at least 30 kg at 11 months of age or 37 kg at eight months. The increase in the number of lambs achieved will cause little increase in grazing pressure during the green feed period.