Getting the best out of sheep

I P. Barrett-Lennard

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Another supporter of the contention that sheep will retain a place in wheatbelt agriculture is Kondut farmer I. P. Barrett-Lennard. He maintains that in most Western Australian agricultural regions, farmers will continue their wheat-legume pasture rotations as the price of nitrogen fertilizer inevitably rises. He also believes that there will be changes in the livestock industries "down on the farm", within the sheep flocks as well as in the pastures they graze. Here he reviews some areas of possible change:

Wool versus meat
The Australian Merino has been developed as a wool producer first and foremost, and only secondarily as meat producer. Only an enormous market, such as that which exists in the Middle East at the present time, could possibly change the emphasis of Merino characteristics.

If that area remains stable for a lengthy period, it is possible that our industry could evolve to be meat/wool rather than wool/meat. What seems more likely, given the independence of sheep men generally, is that certain strains of Merino already better adapted, will be selected for meat/wool. The pursuit of such a sheep may well complement the interest in an easy-care Merino with open points and low wrinkle score, more ideally suited for mechanical wool harvesting and if necessary, manageable without mulesing.

Flock fertility
Today's export demand for live shippers and sheep meat has established saleyard prices at a high level. Continuing high export demand will push prices up still higher. Producers have already responded to these market signals by selling many of their older wethers and great numbers of wether lambs, and by increasing the number of breeding ewes. For some this option is still open.

Beyond this, the fertility of farm flocks is still under pressure. We can anticipate a keen demand for grain lupins for pre-mating supplementation of ewes and rams.
to increase twinning on the one hand, and improve reproductive performance on the other.

Growth rates and genetic improvement
With a marked decrease in the age of wethers and cull ewes turned off to the meat trade, and large numbers of Merino lambs entering the sucker market, early vigour becomes a key selection parameter. Breeders will favour Merino strains with this characteristic.

It is worth noting that while entire male lambs up to weaning age have recorded similar growth rates to wethers, at the one-year-old level both growth and conversion rates of rams have been found to be markedly superior. Surely it is a most opportune time for a proper investigation into the effect of hormone implants for wethers, in view of the huge potential bonus that may be available.

As we are often told, genetic improvements are cheap and permanent. Merino stud and nucleus breeders have an important responsibility to assess the importance of looming shifts in demand for sheep products and the likely permanence of these shifts.

On the research front, work on skin care and fleece characteristics associated with fly strike resistance should be a high priority.

Pasture characteristics
Many of us have become pasture-careless in recent years. At current prices, a good Wongan Hills clover pasture will fix $35 worth of fertiliser nitrogen per ha in one between-crop year.

Because of the many pastures that need resowing, producers can be confident of buoyant clover seed sales, especially for improved strains.

Many farmers will re-examine the economics of pasture topdressing on light land. Grass will be unwanted as a pasture component. Non-legume pastures will be a financial disaster. Without grass, there will be more late spring and summer feed, but less early feed.

New strains of clover should embody the best of what we have now, and combine if possible, into a feed-lot operation. A more likely out-turn is for lambing to start four weeks after the average date of seasonal break. This implies the need for good reserves of coarse grain for ewe supplementation. In this system, most of the ewe flock will need a supplement for a short time in most seasons. For most producers, this is more acceptable than either—

- a large number of very small lambs at weaning time, or
- heavy supplementation of all ewes before lambing and management clashes with seeding.

An interesting and worthwhile sideline can be the strategic lambing-down of one group of ewes much earlier than the rest. All the progeny from these ewes can be sold at higher early prices, with management fitted easily into the seasonal programme.

Continuous cropping and feedlotting
The possibility has been raised that farmers practising continuous cropping might choose to buy-in stock to make use of their stubbles in an unsupplemented or feedlot situation. I believe this duality is unlikely to have general application when one looks at the costs involved.

Our figures indicate that unsupplemented wheat stubble has a grazing value of 25-50 dse weeks per ha. If we can only apportion the value of the grazing at say, 10 cents per head per week, then the total value of the stubble utilisation becomes $2.50 to $5.00 per ha.

If sheep have to be bought in, any profit from this operation would be quickly extinguished in transport and commission costs, without the $1 per ha per annum required to maintain water and fencing.

Therefore it appears likely that in regions where continuous cropping is more profitable than crop/pasture, many stubbles will remain ungrazed, and that the infrastructure for sheep management including fencing, some water supplies and sheds, will be gradually removed or simply allowed to deteriorate.

Feedlotting stubbles might have application in a continuous cropping situation
higher palatability and better early growth rates.

A minor increase in stocking intensity is likely to follow predicted pasture improvement, but we are not likely to see again the grazing pressures that were applied to pastures in the 60's. Chemical manipulation of pastures to prevent grass seed set is likely to be more acceptable to farmers than the inflexibility of very high stocking rates. A bonus could be lower wool vegetable fault.

As the inevitability of rising property values encourages farm amalgamation, so paddock size will increase, and with it, mob size. It will be more difficult to control uneven grazing, and more necessary to use chemicals to manipulate areas of pasture within a single paddock.

Time of lambing
As always, different producers with different objectives will select different lambing dates. It has been suggested that with high stocking intensities an August lambing is possible.

In the Wongan Hills district, lambs need to be weaned by October 20th to avoid intense competition from their mothers on rapidly-maturing pastures.

Here, I would see August lambing as a specialist situation only applying where the lamb is to go...