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Weaning and weaner management

R.J. Lightfoot

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Weaners in many Western Australian Merino flocks are unthrifty by the end of the summer. Often the reason for this is that management is at fault.

Sound management from weaning to maturity gives a healthy and productive flock raised at lower cost. Here Sheep and Wool Adviser R. J. Lightfoot, B.Sc. (Agric.) gives a plan for management of a typical weaner flock.

When to Wean—Factors Affecting the Decision

On some properties Merino lambs are not weaned until they are six or seven months old, whereas in recent experiments lambs have been weaned as young as six weeks of age. An ideal age to wean should lie somewhere within this range.

When trying to pin-point this "ideal age" in any one season, the farmer must consider three factors.

These are:

1. How long does a lamb rely on its mother's milk for its feed requirements?
2. How quickly does a lamb's rumen or paunch develop, so that it can live on pasture alone?
3. How much paddock feed is available for the farm flock and how is it best divided between the various groups of sheep?
• Wean at about 12 weeks — earlier in bad seasons
• Save the best feed paddock for weaning
• Feed weaner groups according to their needs

In an attempt to answer these questions many experiments have been conducted throughout Australia. They have provided us with the following information.

THE EWE'S MILK IS OF LITTLE IMPORTANCE AFTER THE MERINO LAMB IS 10 WEEKS OLD

Many trials have shown that a lamb is very dependent on the ewe's milk throughout the first four weeks of its life. Depending largely on the quality of the pasture offering, milk production can fall from about 45 oz. per day at the beginning of lactation to 20 oz. per day when the lamb is 10 weeks old. On dry, poor quality autumn pastures without supplementation milk yields are further depressed.

Under normal conditions, the ewe's milk supplies only 5 to 10 per cent. of the total feed requirements for a lamb when it is 12 weeks old.

Changes in the relative importance of milk and pasture as the lamb grows are illustrated in the graph.

MERINO LAMBS CAN DIGEST Paddock FEED AT EIGHT WEEKS OF AGE

It has been demonstrated that under natural paddock conditions a lamb will develop a fully functional rumen or paunch and be quite capable of digesting grasses and other paddock feed by the time it is eight weeks old. This means that after eight weeks a lamb relies less and less on its mother's milk for food and increasingly
Experimental weaners at Wongan Hills Research Station, May, 1962.
They were weaned at an average age of 12 weeks, onto culti-trashed oats—sub. clover—Wimmera rye grass pasture and remained on this feed for eight weeks.
Supplementary feeding with oats at 1/2 lb. per head per day, fed three times a week, began in March. The ration was increased to 1 lb. per head per day in April and May.

more on available paddock feed. (see graph.)

In view of this it is obvious that the third factor, the quantity and quality of pasture available is most important in making the decision.

WHEN FEED IS SCARCE, LAMBS MUST COMPETE WITH EWES FOR THE BETTER QUALITY PASTURE

A flock of sheep usually grazes selectively across a paddock on a “face.” Consequently, the leading sheep get the best feed and the “tail,” which normally includes the lambs, get feed which has already been picked over.

After eight weeks of age the lamb relies on grazing for its feed requirements so when the season is poor and paddock feed scarce, a simple system of competition develops. Both the ewes and lambs are chasing the same pick, so it is likely that the lambs, being smaller and less experienced in selective grazing, will come off second best.

EARLY WEANING IS BEST IN POOR SEASONS

Many trials have shown that there is no advantage in leaving a Merino lamb on the ewe longer than 14 weeks.

When pasture growth is poor, lambs are best weaned at 10 to 12 weeks of age whereas under severe drought conditions weaning can be successfully carried out when the lambs are as young as eight weeks.

Under normal conditions in south Western Australia, once a lamb is 12 weeks old it should be weaned onto the best pasture available rather than left on the ewe to deplete the scanty milk supply and compete with adult sheep for second class pasture.

Once the lambs are weaned, supplementary feeding, if required, can be carried out more economically because weaners only are being fed.

The ewes can then be treated as dry sheep, stocked at higher rates and their body condition controlled as desired, leaving the best paddocks for the grown weaners.

If this is done other paddocks can be reserved to provide valuable feed for the late summer months.

WEANING PROCEDURE

Once it is decided at what age to wean the lambs many other factors still require careful consideration. These concern management of the weaner flock, in which the aim should be to raise healthy and productive sheep at the lowest possible cost.

Most important of all is the selection of a paddock on which to run the freshly weaned lambs.

Over the summer months the weaners will be the most important sheep on the farm. They should therefore be treated accordingly. The best paddock should be especially reserved and prepared one
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1960 spring drop two-tooth ewes from a time of lambing experiment at Merredin Research Station. These ewes were weaned in November, 1960, at 12 weeks of age onto mown and left pasture, where they remained for one month.

Supplementary feeding with oats began in mid-January, with ½ lb. per head per day, which was increased to 1 lb in March. The ewes weighed 90 lb. at 12 months and cut an average of 9 lb. of wool for nine months growth when shorn the following August. This year, after a spring lambing, they cut an average of 13 lb. of wool per head.

Month before the lambs are due to be weaned.

Where ewes are mated in March for an August or spring lambing, the weaning paddock may require mowing, slashing or cabling to avoid a grass seed problem. Besides controlling grass seeds, mowing or topping also improves the nutritional value of the pasture over the summer months.

On the lighter soil types cuti-trashed pastures provide excellent feed, if reserved for November-weaned spring lambs.

Where lambing has extended over more than six weeks, two or even three weanings may be necessary to ensure that all weaners do well over the coming summer months. This is particularly important when weaning under drought conditions at eight weeks of age.

MANAGING THE WEANER FLOCKS

It is well known that breeding ewes and wethers have different feed requirements, yet few realise that the same principle applies to ewe and wether weaners.

As a wether weaner will grow into a wool producer only, the economics of the situation are such that it does not warrant as much feed as a developing ewe weaner. Apart from producing wool the ewe weaner must reach sexual maturity as early as possible for mating to begin her role as a lamb producer.

A weaner feeding trial at Wongan Hills Research Station in 1961 showed that although the wether weaners receiving supplements cut more wool than those receiving none, the extra wool production did not pay for the costs of feeding.

Similar work carried out in the Eastern States has also indicated that feeding Merino wethers for wool production does not pay.

It must be stressed, however, that if deaths are liable to occur in a poor season, supplementary feeding to prevent sheep losses through malnutrition, is essential.

DIVIDE THE WEANER FLOCK INTO THREE GROUPS

If suitable paddocks are available it is good management to divide the weaners into three groups.

GROUP 1

The ewe weaners, which will usually require a grain supplement through the late summer and autumn months to ensure that they receive no set-back and mature quickly.

GROUP 2

The wether weaners, which do not warrant as much feed as the ewes. These frequently do not need supplementary feeding but where supplements are given, hay will usually suffice.

GROUP 3

The “tail” of the weaner flock, both ewes and wethers. These require special care and when they are kept separate,
ad-lib feeding of oats, beginning in early summer can be carried out economically. Running a couple of old ewes with this mob to act as leaders and drenching them early in summer as a safeguard against worms, is well worthwhile.

By supplementing only those sheep which need it, the farmer can considerably reduce feeding costs and at the same time ensure the thrift of his weaners.

SHEARING SPRING DROP LAMBS

Most autumn drop lambs are shorn at the normal August-September shearing. Spring dropped lambs, however, are usually too young to shear at this time of the year and in many districts must be shorn when weaned about November to overcome the grass seed hazard.

As most spring lambing farmers shear in autumn, the weaners are then re-shorn together with the main flock at that time of the year to promote thrift and achieve wool growth uniformity with the rest of the flock.

IN BRIEF

The main points to remember are—

- In most farming districts of Western Australia, Merino lambs are best weaned at 12 weeks of age. When drought conditions prevail however, they can be weaned as early as eight weeks.

- Choose the best paddock on which to wean the lambs. This may require mowing, topping or similar treatment for November-weaned spring drop lambs.

- Divide the weaners into three flocks—the ewes, the wethers and the “tail”—so that each can be fed according to its needs, and feeding costs reduced.

Book Review...

THE PIG—MODERN HUSBANDRY AND MARKETING

This book is compiled and edited by W. T. Price, Principal of Harper Adams Agricultural College.

The pig-raiser will find the book has been presented in a practical way. It is well illustrated with graphs, diagrams and photographs. As a teachers' guide and students' reference, and also for the adviser, it should be a valuable acquisition.

Each chapter has been contributed by a leading authority. Chapters include the economics of pig production, systems of pig-raising, breeding, nutrition, disease and marketing of pigs.

In compiling material for the book, the authors have based their subject matter mainly on British standards of pig-raising. However, general principles, particularly of nutrition, breeding and disease are applicable to Australian conditions.

A chapter on economic principles, which discusses production levels, costs and returns, quality and price and the investment of capital, is a useful guide to the economics of pig-raising.

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