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Weaning Lambs under Pastoral Conditions

By H. SUIJDENDORP and L. PARSONS

IN the summer rainfall region of the pastoral areas lambs are too often born too late to ensure their survival. In good seasons with a fair measure of winter rain more late lambs will survive, but losses are still serious. The only solution to this problem is to make sure lambs drop in May-June. But the presence of late and often unmarked lambs at mating time is a disturbing influence, which makes it hard to advance the established mating pattern.

Coolawanyah Station found itself in this predicament with some 2,300 young lambs at foot in October, 1963. To save most of these lambs and ensure an early mating in December, it was decided to wean them at a very early age and handfeed them until the break of the season.

Weaning Procedure
Some 2,300 lambs were weaned in November. Their ages varied from six to 10 weeks. The native pasture was dry and of low nutritive value.

Three small paddocks with two water points each were selected to wean into.

A set of portable yards was essential for the success of the operation. The yards were erected around the watering trough, preferably with plenty of shade in the yard. Lambs were weaned in mobs of about 400, and were transported by truck from the drafting yards to the weaning yards. As the lambs were unloaded a dose of vitamin A containing drench was administered.

Feeding
On arrival in the yard the lambs were given a bale of hay which was consumed readily. Next day they were fed ½ lb. of

Young lambs being fed oats on strips of bagging
oats per head spread over the top of a strip of hay. In three days most lambs were eating straight oats. On the third day the lambs were let out quietly onto a line of oats, and brought in to feed (½ lb. oats a day) every morning for a week. After this the frequency of feeding was gradually broken down to 1 lb. twice a week. In about 10 days the lambs would come in on sighting the feed truck.

General Observations

Fences had to be patrolled regularly and stray lambs put back. This was not hard as the animals were quiet. By the end of December a few storms produced fresh shoots on the perennial grasses and feeding was discontinued.

It is not suggested that handfeeding of weaners be adopted as a normal practice instead of lambing at the most suitable time. However, it may be worthwhile to save out-of-season lambs this way, especially when lambing figures are critically low. It was considered that half the lambs would have died before the onset of early storms. By weaning in the manner described only 10 lambs were lost.

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