Mules and tailstrip lambs at marking time

R.J. Lightfoot
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Mulesing and tailstripping should be routine operations in all Merino flocks. For extra convenience and longer protection against fly strike it pays to . . .

mules and tailstrip lambs

By R. J. LIGHTFOOT, B.Sc. (Agric.), Adviser, Sheep and Wool Branch

THE mules and tailstrip operation is basic to fly strike control and should be routine practice in all flocks in the same way as other accepted management practices like marking and crutching.

Most farmers who mules and tailstrip their flocks do the operation on weaners soon after shearing or crutching in the autumn months. Mulesing and tailstripping can also conveniently be done on lambs at marking time.

Experimental Evidence . . .
An experiment (see following article for details) was conducted at the Merredin Research Station to—

- Compare the incidence of fly strike in ewe lambs that had been mulesed and tailstripped at marking time with fly strike in lambs that had been marked (tail docked) only.
- Determine whether the additional treatment involved by mulesing and tailstripping lambs at marking time resulted in any set back to their subsequent growth or wool production.

When marking was carried out, the lambs varied in age from a few days to six weeks. Tails were cut to the recommended "tip of the vulva" length using a knife.

No lambs died after treatment.

Briefly, the experiment demonstrated that—

- Mulesing lambs does not cause any setback. The mulesed lambs grow
Mulesing and tailstripping at lamb marking, using the Cranmore Cradle. The lamb in the centre of the picture has been earmarked, inoculated, mulesed, tailstripped and taillocked. The operator on the left will dust the wounds with a diazinon powder and release the lamb.

just as well as unmulesed lambs after marking.

- Mulesed and tailstripped lambs cut just as much wool at the lamb shearing as do untreated lambs.
- The incidence of fly strike in the first year of life can be greatly reduced by mulesing lambs.

There were 10 times as many crutch strikes in “marked only” lambs as in lambs that were mulesed and tailstripped.

After marking, both groups of lambs were run as one flock. Had they been run separately, it is probable that crutch strike would have been totally eliminated in the mulesed flock as they would not have been exposed to the large numbers of flies

Left: Unmulesed weaner. Right: Weaner mulesed and tailstripped at marking time. Note the bare tail and greatly enlarged skin area around the crutch.
that congregated around the unmulesed sheep.

**Advantages**

Mulesing at lamb-marking time has several management advantages over mulesing at the conventional time as weaners.

These are—

- The lambs are light and easy to handle.
- The mules and tailstrip operation is combined with another essential management procedure and so reduces labour costs.
- Sheep are protected from blowfly strike from marking for the rest of their life.
- Lambs heal very quickly after mulesing and tailstripping at marking time.

**Disadvantages**

Two disadvantages must be considered before mulesing at lamb-marking time is adopted:

- If the operator does not remove as much skin as is possible on the lambs, a small proportion of the flock may require re-treatment as weaners.
- If lambs are treated during a blowfly wave some may be struck in the mulesing wounds as they heal.

*It is strongly recommended that whenever lambs are mulesed and tailstripped at marking time, the wounds be dusted with a diazinon based powder, immediately after treatment. This will virtually eliminate the possibility of subsequent strike in the wounds as they heal.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marked only group</th>
<th>Mulesed and tailstripped at lamb marking group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Starting the mules operation on the right hand side

The completed mules operation on the right hand side. The left side is then done as a mirror image of the right side
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Procedure for Mulesing at Lamb Marking

1. The lambs should be retained in temporary yards in the paddock. Marking in established sheep yards can result in losses through tetanus infection.

2. Use of a lamb-marking cradle such as that illustrated leads to fast and efficient operation. Lambs can also be easily mulesed and tailstripped if held on a board as is normal for lamb marking.

3. Very small lambs (less than three days old) should not be mulesed, tailstripped and marked. They can be lifted from the temporary yards into the paddock with the ewes and treated at the next marking.

4. Ewe lambs should be—
   - inoculated,
   - ear marked,
   - mulesed,
   - tailstripped,
   - tail docked,
   - and dusted with a diazinon powder,
in that order.

Male lambs should be castrated before the mules, tailstrip and docking treatments.

It is essential that a knife be used to cut the tail to the correct “tip of the vulva” length, leaving a flap of skin to heal over the stump after the tailstrip operation.

The knives and mulesing shears should be dipped in a solution of disinfectant between lambs. This is normal hygiene and should be done whenever lambs are marked and sheep or lambs mulesed.

The Mules Operation

The treatment consists of the removal of two crescent-shaped pieces or strips of skin, one each side of the vulva. With healing, the cut edges of skin on either side of the vulva come together, stretching out and considerably enlarging the bare skin area in the process.

The cuts should start at a point just below and to the side of the butt of the tail and skirt, but not cut into, the bare skin around the vulva. They are finished by tapering off to a point just above the hamstring. The widest part of the cut should be opposite the vulva.

To obtain maximum stretching and the full benefit, the treatment must be drastic. It must take off as much skin as possible.

The effect of the mules treatment when healed is to extend or enlarge the bare skin area surrounding the vulva and so reduce the wooly area in the crutch that holds moisture. By reducing moisture and keeping the crutch drier and cleaner, mulesing makes the area much less attractive to the fly and the sheep much less susceptible to crutch strike.

Summed up, mulesing deprives the flies of their favourite breeding ground—the moist crutch of the living sheep—resulting in much less strike and fewer flies to initiate further strike.

The Tailstrip Operation

Tailstripping done in conjunction with mulesing, gives added protection against crutch and tail strike. Tailstripping consists of the removal or “stripping off” of the wool-bearing skin on top of the tail. The cut should start with a sharp pointed “V” about two inches below the base of the tail. When this initial “V” cut has
been made, the flap of skin so formed can be held in the left hand. Using an upwards sawing action with the lower blade of the mulesing shears in the right hand, the strip of woolbearing skin on the upper surface of the tail can be taken off in one action.

This cut should extend along the tail beyond where the tail is to be cut off—a point level with the tip of the vulva in ewe lambs.

Do not cut away any skin on the bare under-surface of the tail. The principle is similar to mulesing in that during healing, the bare skin under the tail is drawn around leaving a bare or wool-less tail that does not soil and attract flies.

In Brief . . .

- Mulesing, tailstripping and correct tail length are basic to blowfly control and should be part of every Merino flock owner’s management.
- Woolgrowers have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by treating their lambs as part of the annual routine.
- Mulesing and tailstripping, with training and practice, can be done efficiently by any station or farm hand.
- Practical instruction in the correct technique must first be obtained from an experienced operator.

Contact the Sheep and Wool Section, Department of Agriculture, South Perth, or the local Department of Agriculture Adviser for practical instruction and demonstration in mulesing and tailstripping.