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Time of lambing at Esperance

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ESPERANCE is one of the few places in Western Australia at which experiments over three years have shown a definite improvement in number of lambs produced to marking, as a result of lambing in the August-September period.

Not only were more lambs produced, but ewes grew more wool and less tender fleeces compared with the May lambing group—which incidentally was hand fed.

Yet time of lambing is probably a more controversial issue at Esperance than most other areas. Why is majority opinion opposed to late lambing in the Esperance area?

Probably the main reason is that some years ago a movement towards later lambing coincided with a high apparent incidence of “clover disease” in flocks grazing mainly Yarloop subclover. This set of circumstances led people to believe that clover disease effects were more severe under late lambing conditions.

Whether such a conclusion is valid however, is open to question because there has been no controlled time of lambing comparison on Yarloop, Dwalganup or other suspect pasture in the area. The original experiments at Esperance Downs Research Station were done on Bacchus Marsh based pasture, which is considered relatively safe.

It is also highly probable that in some cases year to year fluctuations in the severity of “clover disease” has prevented accurate assessment of lambing times on fertility.

In recent years the number of flocks lambing in the August-September period could be counted on the fingers of one hand—and this again has reduced the accuracy of comparisons between times of lambing.

In the face of conflicting ideas on this question, what can be suggested to farmers?

The Case for Later Lambing

If we look at the question in the first place without the complications due to “clover disease” we find that most experimentation and observation favours later lambing. It is now accepted that on so-called relatively “safe” pasture later lambing enables a higher breeding ewe carrying rate, less supplementary feeding, better lamb growth at high stocking rates, less tender wool, more wool per head and sometimes a higher lamb marking percentage.

There should therefore be no hesitation in adopting late lambing on pastures based on such species as Bacchus Marsh, Clare and Mt. Barker sub clovers, lucerne and the medics generally and possibly Woogenellup and Geraldton sub clovers.

Admittedly, much is still to be learnt about the oestrogenic potency of plant species, but so far in Western Australia severe “clover disease” has not been noted on any of the pastures just mentioned. “Clover disease” cannot therefore be used as an argument against acceptance of late lambing in this case.

If the argument is extended to older pastures containing a higher percentage of grass but also having potent strains of clover such as Dwalganup, then the answer must still be that later lambing has not resulted in lower lamb marking percentages in the majority of field trials in this State.

Because there has been no reduction in lambs produced and the same advantages apply as mentioned before, then later
lambing must again be favoured on this type of pasture.

The situation is more complex when we come to breeding ewes grazing new dominant potent sub clovers over portion or most of the farm. Here the effects of "clover disease" are most marked and obvious, and infertility will develop in ewes regardless of time of lambing. Sterility is the usual eventual outcome of continued ingestion of potent strains.

Temporary Effects?

In recent years the idea has developed that while permanent infertility is progressively developing the ewe may also suffer temporary infertility under some conditions. It has been suggested that lowered conception and increased dystokia is brought about by grazing potent green clover just before and during mating and lambing.

If these temporary effects do in fact occur in the field then late lambing could be at a disadvantage because of the higher probability of green clover occurring during mating, and larger quantities being available at lambing. However, it should be remembered that very severe "clover disease" effects have been experienced with both so-called autumn as well as spring lambing. Also, considerable dystokia or difficult lambing can occur in ewes grazing dry safe clover, which suggests that experience of green clover in previous years has had the major influence in these cases.

Research Station Flocks

Whatever might be the eventual outcome of investigations into these matters, August lambing experimental flocks on Esperance Downs Research Station and in the district this year gave comparable results to earlier lambing flocks. However, these are only general observations and in the present state of knowledge arguments can be raised for and against each time of lambing in respect of both permanent and temporary infertility due to clover. The situation will not be clarified in the field until further experiments are conducted.

The Alternatives

In the meantime Esperance farmers on new country carrying varying amounts of potent clover strains are faced with two alternatives:

- Accept autumn lambing and consequent reduction in breeding ewe carrying rate and hence income

- Accept August lambing—at the same time minimising any deleterious affects which might occur, by restricting grazing as far as possible to safer pasture at mating and lambing time, and preventing ewes from becoming too fat near lambing because this could increase dystokia under "clover disease" conditions.

In all other situations the most reasonable choice is August-September lambing.

Stocking rate is the biggest single determinant of income from Merinos, and because of pasture production and nutritional aspects the higher stocking rates of breeding ewes are tied to later lambing. It seems clear therefore that maximum economic production an acre on the Esperance area will only be realised with a combination of oestrogenically safe and productive pastures and later (August-September) lambing.

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