

CASE STUDY ON UN-MULESED SHEEP

David & Genevieve Counsell “Dunblane” Barcaldine

Summary:

- Farm management stopped mulesing in 2008 to take advantage of emerging price premiums.
- To reduce breech strike risk, management has altered shearing and crutching dates.
- Self-replacing Merino (19.8 μ) flock with lambing in May-July and wethers retained to 4 years of age.
- Two minor fly wave events occurred - Sept 2008 and late April 2009 and very low levels of fly strike have been detected

Background

Dunblane is a 30,000ac property on open downs country, west of Barcaldine. The predominate grass is Mitchell grass. The business runs a self-replacing Merino (19.8 μ) flock with wethers retained until 4yo.

Annual average rainfall is 497mm and median is 459mm with predominate summer rainfall. The highly variable rainfall means fly waves can occur anywhere from Sept to May and fly control measures must be largely response-driven or based on long acting chemicals.

Management

Shearing occurs in mid-summer (Jan-Feb) and crutching of adult sheep occurs in Sept-Oct, to co-incide with the start of summer storms and fly activity. Lambs are crutched in Jan-Feb and shorn in March.

Lambmarking occurs at end of growing season, often this is a tough time for young sheep in

years of an early finish (protein drought) – so it's not an ideal time to mules with the danger of losing too many lambs.

For the past 8-10 years, genetic selection has included bright white wools and decreased wrinkle with plainer sheep from Terrick - Blackall, a stud using quantitative genetics.

Very little body strike occurs anymore due to the focus on rams that can handle hot steamy summers.

Any sheep that does become fly strike is tagged, culled and go to the 'terminal' paddock where they are joined to XB and usually sold ASAP.

An annual AI program commenced in 2009 using several CTSE evaluated sires noted for very bright white wool as well as leading wool production traits. However there was limited data on body wrinkle of the sires used and this is a concern to management.

Decision to stop mulesing

In 2008, the decision was made to stop mulesing. We have not mulesed since. The initial decision was partially made for us because of drought conditions at lambmarking at the time.

We were reasonably confident in our sheep handling the local blow fly risk due to our genetics program and the fact there are far less flies in our environment due to how dry and hot it normally is. To further reduce fly risk, we moved shearing forward into mid-summer (from late autumn) and hence are able to use crutching to significantly reduce our breech and pizzle strike going into the high risk period of summer.

We now jet all weaners on the breech at weaning with a long acting product, preferably Cooper's Fly & Lice fluid™. So far this has given us good protection over the last two wet summers.

Results

Lambs

At lamb-marking 2008, seasonal conditions were very dry. The decision was made to not mules and yard wean all weaner/lambs onto a full supplement ration. Mulesing was abandoned due to low bodyweights of weaners (11-12kg).

All lambs were jetted on tail in October 2008, due to significant covert breech strikes. We lost about 2-3% lambs in a short period of time, from very small strike areas.

This outbreak of strike occurred with some "daggy bums" getting around due to some green herbage from rain. I was also trialling some lambs/weaners on grain which caused scouring. Any scouring made the sheep very susceptible to breech strike, hence the jetting. Often the scour was only 1-2cm wide so it was not much of a scour but it sure did cause some fly strike.

We recorded approximately 10 lambs out of 700 (1.4%) with breech strike at shearing in April 2009. There was no evidence of body strike despite an excellent summer season.

Lamb fleece wool was noted for some extra colour at shearing – this is concerning but probably due to the wet summer and good season.

Adult sheep

5% of adult wethers in two mobs were pizzle struck in Sept 2008 but this was not related to breech strike. Possibly 20-30 wethers died out of 2,400. There was no body or breech strike in wethers. Crutching delivered the solution and there were no more problems.

Odd numbers of ewes and others were struck in Sept 08, but there were no further strikes over summer as sheep were either crutched or shorn.

20% of rams were severely poll struck going into summer (& joining). Their polls were jetted with Vetrazin™ and there have been no issues since.

Comments

Un-mulesed lambs get more urine and faecal soiling around the tail.

The outbreak of covert pizzle strike in the wether mobs was costly because of sheep losses.

It's important to be able to respond quickly with jetting when fly-strike occurs or conditions favourable for fly-strike occur.

There is a need for better fly-strike detection methods in order to better predict low levels of fly strike, wether pizzle strike in particular. Fly traps will be used as a monitoring tool in the future.

There was zero body strike over summer and only approximately 20kg of maggot wool at general shearing in Jan 09. We had a wet summer but the flies didn't seem to worry us. Was this luck, good management or something else?

Dung beetle activity in cattle dung has been excellent; I haven't seen so much activity before. I assume this must be helping control flies.

Shearer's haven't complained about wrinkly lambs tails.

Some shearing results suggest that we aren't as white and bright in the wool as we need to be, though there was little evidence of fleece rot in this year's clip.

At the time of writing, (Jan 2010) this summer suddenly has become a very wet year and yet no sheep have been detected with fly strike 2 weeks out from shearing.

In Future

Jet all lambs on tail with Vetrazin (or Clik) in Aug-September. Could be better with 20 weeks protection from Clik Spray-On, have to check costs.

Poll jet rams as a preventative in September, this is a must-do job.

AI rams to be selected for low body wrinkle & bright, white wool to decrease susceptibility to fleece rot and body strike. Concentrate on decreased body (breach) wrinkle rather than increased bare area.

Continue timely, response driven, use of crutching.

Find better methods for detecting early strikes when flystrike is still at a low prevalence

Seek a market advantage for non-mulesed wool.

No lamb-marking muster. I am considering just lamb-marking, jetting and weaning all on the one day, then weaning into the yards for a few days onto green lucerne hay. This is to drop one of the musters.

Wrinkle scores

I have created an annual flock benchmark for wrinkle score. Each year I measure 100-200 lambs at lambmarking and score via AWI guidelines. This will be used to judge progress (provide objective evidence) in reducing wrinkle score across the flock in the years ahead

I am considering using Clips™ on the wrinkly lambs especially if breach strike incidence increases in years going forward. Watch this space.

Assess all AI ram weaners for wrinkle to include wrinkle into their selection indexes to identify ram lambs that will make it into the ram team.

I need to identify ways of wrinkle scoring maiden ewes off-shears & ear tag so wrinkly commercial ewes are put into meat sheep breeding flock and are not included into AI program.