

Sheep for Profit® Newsletter October 2008



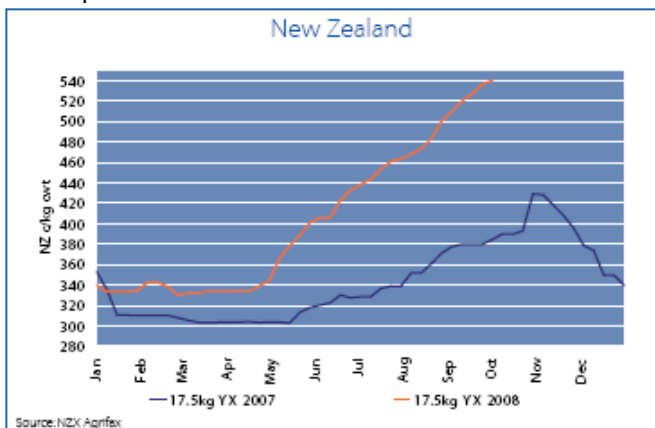
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Positive outlook for lamb

(Courtesy of Rabobank Agribusiness Review October 2008)

Farm gate lamb prices have continued their rise during September, increasing by 6% (around 30cents/kg CWT) to exceed NZD 5.00/kg across the main weights and grades. These price levels are unprecedented.



- International market prices have been relatively steady

- A weaker NZ dollar against most key trading currencies has helped, and NZ sheep meat exports have been on the rise (up 12% in August)

Early indications are that **lamb survival rates** are good, even in the drought affected areas, but **ewe body condition** is under pressure.

These light ewes with a lot of lambs, coupled with a significant decrease in the use of fertiliser (P and N) on hill country sheep properties this year, will probably stay under pressure until weaning which suggests this year of all years, is when hill country lamb producers need a viable store lamb market.

Fingers crossed that the demise of the milk commodity market and the positive outlook for lamb talked about will provide enough incentive for some finishing operators to drive demand for store lambs.

Sheep Not So Stupid?

(Courtesy of Gavin Milne, Agricom Spring Newsletter 2008)

When encountering a new or strange feed, two or three sheep will sample the food and for 48 hours no other sheep will touch that food.

If nothing happens, the rest of the mob will start eating it.

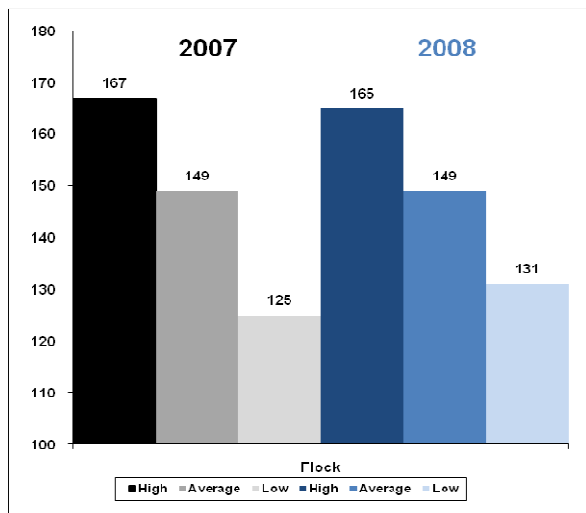
If one of the sheep dies, the mob won't touch that food.

Moreover, the mob will remember this for about FIVE years.

This behaviour has so far only been discovered in sheep so they are not so stupid after all!

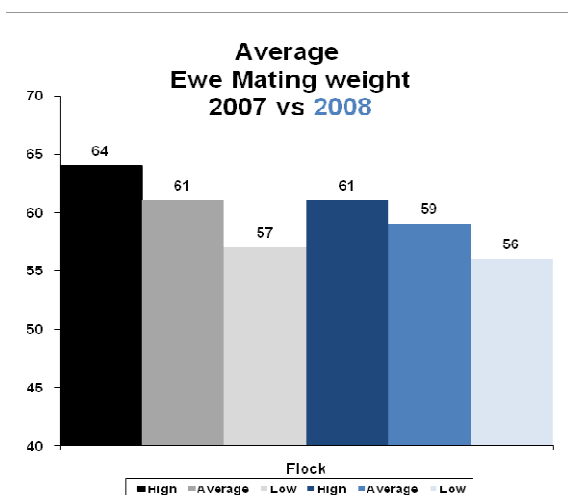
You may ask "why some sheep die of toxicity from forages, such as nitrate poisoning?" In this case the sheep are familiar with the plant species because they have eaten it in the past without problem, but they can't sense the increase in nitrate levels in the herbage.

Flock Mating Performance comparison



An average scanning of 149% was achieved across all our Sheep for Profit farmers this year. This was despite a lot of areas enduring a drought and “anecdotal reports” that scanning was well back on last year.

Even more interesting was the comparison between years for average mating liveweight- the ewes went to the ram 2kg lighter. A lot of light 2T ewes went to the ram this year, particularly on our farms in drought affected areas.



This has driven the average Scanning Index for 2008 to 2.53, up from 2.44 for 2007.

This is no easy feat as we had our fair share of farms in drought affected areas this year, farms

that are recovering from drought last year, and many farms having difficulty quitting cull ewes well before mating.

We believe one of the significant factors was weight gain achieved over mating which is the result of farmers picking up on all the things that our system has identified as important to achieve the optimal mating performance.

This includes recognising the value of:

- preferential management of light ewes from WEANING onwards
- preferential management of heavy ewes prior to mating to ensure adequate opportunity for all ewes to gain weight while with the ram.
- managing all the animal health risks as required, well before tupping date (FE, Barbers Pole and Salmonella)
- making decisions on information eg. delaying mating of a group of ewes which were well behind mating weight targets.
- achieving a sale lamb performance with over 50% lambs being sold pre weaning (average for 2008 was 53%)

Understanding the product (lamb)

Live weight and yield are probably the most important factors that affect the value of processed lambs. Our Sale Lamb Analysis reports are highlighting how yield varies between farms and between months on the same farm. As most lambs are selected over the scales the actual yield can have a major impact on the lamb value. Some factors that can influence carcass yield include:

- Breed – at the same GR, Merino and Merino cross lambs yield 1.5% to 3.5% lower than other breeds
- Older lambs tend to have lower yields
- Higher GR score/fatness is associated with higher yields. Guidelines:

	Unweaned	Weaned
GR 0-5mm	43%	41%
GR 6-10mm	45%	43%
GR 11-15mm	47%	45%
GR 16-20mm	49%	47%
GR >20mm	51%	49%

- Holding off feed and water increases yield.
Guidelines:
 - 0-3 hours 0
 - 4-5 hours +1%
 - 6-8 hours +2%
 - 9-12 hours +2-3%
 - 13-24 hours +3.5-4.5%
- Low quality pastures can decrease yields by as much as 3%
- Slow weight gain is generally associated with lower yield
- Wether lambs yield higher than ewe lambs
- Wet wool/skin increases yield

A system to estimate GR

Feel for amount of tissue covering the 12th rib bone. Make sure fingers are right through any wool and resting on the skin before making any assessment.

- 0-5mm – Easy to feel ribs separately. Can't feel any tissue over ribs
- 6-10mm – Easy to feel separate ribs but can also feel some tissue over them
- 11-15mm – Ribs still easy to separate but more tissue can be felt
- 16-20mm – Can only just feel the ribs
- >20mm – Can't feel the ribs and tissue movement over them has a fluidy feel

But it's not this simple – most times there may be a few factors that are all working at the same time. The message is to spend a bit more time when the lambs are in for drafting to get more of them into the high value segments.

Rectal prolapse IS associated with tail length!

We've finally found some science that must remove much of the doubt and confusion.

A US study involved feedlot male and female lambs which were docked with rubber rings at 1-7 days old.

3 tail lengths were compared (Fig 1)

- Short - Ring placed on the tail as close to

the body as possible so that virtually the entire tail was removed

- Medium—Elastrator band placed on the tail at a location midway between the attachment of the tail to the body and the attachment of the caudal folds to the tail
- Long—Elastrator band placed on the tail at the attachment of the caudal folds to the tail.

Caudal folds are webs of skin on both sides of the anus with one end connected to the under-side of the tail and the other end connected to the body.



Figure 1. Tail lengths in lambs docked with short (left), medium (centre) & long (right) tails

The study involved 1227 lambs (612 female, 615 male) and all males were castrated.

Key findings:

- Overall incidence of rectal prolapse was 4.9% (60 lambs)
- Ewe lambs had a 1.9 times greater than males ($p < 0.05$)
- Incidence of rectal prolapse was greater ($P < 0.05$) for Short-docked lambs (7.81%) than for either Medium- (3.97%) or Long-docked (1.85%) lambs, but the difference between the Medium- and Long-docked groups was not statistically significant.
- Using a Medium dock length instead of a Short dock length decreased the incidence of rectal prolapse by 49.2%, and using a Long dock length instead of a Short dock length decreased the incidence of rectal prolapse by 76.3%.
- No pasture fed lambs had a prolapse compared to 11.3% of lambs fed a high energy concentrate diet

The fact that the incidence of rectal prolapse ranged between 0.12% (not significantly different from 0%) to 7.81% among the six locations in this study suggests that there are management and environmental factors not quantified in this study that influence the incidence of rectal prolapse.

The data from this study was combined from another very similar one to provide some very solid evidence that lambs that will be fed high energy rations should have their tails removed where the caudal folds meet the tail.

Our observations have always suggested a strong link between rectal prolapses and excellent growth rates which must mean a high energy diet. Prolapses have tended to be more common in ewe lambs but that may be due to them getting high priority and being on the farm longer.

Most actions have a reaction – sometimes good, sometimes bad!

We've found an excellent review of the effects of nutrition on reproduction in farm animals. The paper has been written to highlight the danger of focusing on one aspect of reproduction without understanding the consequences on another aspect. Eg.

- In sheep, moderate undernutrition during the late prenatal (6 weeks) and early postnatal growing phases caused a significant depression in adult ovulation rates.
- Undernutrition for an 8-week period from 6 weeks of age reduced ovulation rates in ewes for up to 3 years
- Very good feeding in hoggets and heifers to get them right for mating can end up depressing their udder development and future milk production
- We talk about “flushing” to increase ovulation rates but if the high feeding level continues into early pregnancy embryo survival can be decreased. Take that a step further where “flushing” has given a high scanning rate but if ewes aren't fed well in late pregnancy we just end up with more dead ewes and more dead lambs!!

This is a large review covering sheep, cattle and pigs (as well as some content on rats & rabbits) but it has to be a good read for those who are interested in getting a much better understanding of feeding impacts on reproductive performance.

Find it in our Forum - REPRODUCTIVE PERFORMANCE – EWE FLOCK/Nutrition in the reproduction of farm animals.

Another paper, hot off the press (note the author!) shows that over-feeding hoggets during pregnancy can lead to foetal losses during pregnancy and underfeeding can lead to decreased lamb survival. Again it's all about getting that balance – grow them out from birth and feed sensibly.

Find it in our Forum - MANAGEMENT OF EWE REPLACEMENTS/Ewe lamb nutrition during pregnancy affects pregnancy outcome

Common Employment Goofs

(Courtesy of the Veterinary Business Letter)

The following cause a lot of problems- try and avoid them!

- Inappropriate questions asked during applicant interviews
- Botched background checks
- Ignoring employee complaints of possible problems
- Interviewer ignorance about employment laws
- Unduly casual responses to compliance issues
- Actions that may be perceived as retaliatory
- Dismissals not justified by consistent documentation
- Documentation missing or inadequate.