Animal Health

Sheep group targets profit drain

SHEEP For Profit systems being used by a group of Southern Hawkes Bay farmers have highlighted how a single worm infestation can quickly wipe more than $16,000 off revenue.

The group from Pongaroa, south of Dannevirke, learned a practical lesson about how the Barber's Pole worm contributed to a less-than-expected mating performance on some of the group's farms. They meet every 10 weeks with Sheep For Profit advisor Don MacColl.

Barber's Pole can survive better than other worms through long dry periods and MacColl says Pongaroa had dry weather earlier this year. There was no significant rain till March and some farmers were then worried about ewes not gaining weight. Mating didn't occur until four to six weeks after the rains.

The detailed measurements kept by the Sheep For Profit group reveals that a decision on five of the seven farms not to drench had a significant impact on the mating performance of their ewe flocks this year.

The blood-sucking Barber's Pole worm quickly makes sheep anaemic. Its eggs can go through three larval stages in as few as four days, compared with a minimum 21 days for other worm types. Infected sheep can die but sheep with subclinical or 'hidden' Barber's Pole burdens suffer from poor appetite, reduced weight gain or weight loss. Critically timed drenching for the worm, which can put out 10,000 eggs a day compared with 200 for other types, can deliver significant extra revenue (or avoid high opportunity costs).

MacColl says the Sheep For Profit system revealed that one of the Pongaroa farms with a flock of 3000 ewes and a Scan Index of 2.6, was mated 5kg lighter than target mating weight because of the Barber's Pole infection. For this flock, that is the equivalent of 330 fewer lambs which, at last year's lamb weaning value, was worth $16,170 (or $5.40 per ewe mated).

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MacColl says without the Sheep For Profit systems and input on the day from one of the Sheep For Profit partners, Merial, five of the seven farmers may have just accepted the lower scan rate as "seasonal".

"We've had a 'light bulb' moment, and the group is confident about investing in drenching with the appropriate drench at the right time. They're also aware of the need to monitor the weather and its potential impact on Barber's Pole and production.

"This experience erases any concern over the economics of drenching. The 38 cent cost of drenching a 60kg ewe is small compared with the benefits, even if drenching has to be repeated two or three times to make sure Barber's Pole worm in the ewe flock is properly managed," MacColl says.

One of the group that didn't get Barber's Pole on his farm, Shaun Baxter, says his decision to use a long-acting drench was prompted by a previous group conversation about worms the month before.

"We thought the weather was right for Barber's Pole and it's the first time we've drenched the whole 4100 flock for it," Baxter says.

"Going on the figures for those who didn't, it was the right decision." As a result his ewes put on 6kg in the first two cycles after the ram was put out.

"With Sheep For Profit you're measuring everything and if there's a problem you can at least look back and find the cause."


Don MacColl, Sheep For Profit advisor.

A three-year pilot programme, which included 50 farms from all over New Zealand, showed the Sheep For Profit system lifted gross income per farm by $67,752 above the national average from 2001 to 2003.

Sheep for Profit is now inviting applicants nationwide for its second intake. Successful applicants each have a Sheep For Profit advisor. The measurement system they'll use helps them identify what's driving or hindering farm performance. Farmers set their own goals and can achieve significant rises in revenues and cash surpluses. Application forms are available now from Sheep for Profit coordinator Fiona Owen 07 872 0247. They must be submitted before October 31.