

Reasons for an Autumn Lambing Programme in the Western District of Victoria

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Summary

The advantages and disadvantages of an autumn lambing are outlined.

Advantages : The autumn lambing programme fits the overall plan of operations better than any other that can be devised. The lambs generally do reasonably well, provided that a break in the weather occurs in the autumn and that they are dropped before rough cold weather sets in. The ewes' ration is suitable for most of the time. Shearing can be carried out at the right period and is best related to available feed.

Disadvantages: The mating period may not be that of highest fertility or fecundity. If the autumn break in the weather is late, nutrition during late pregnancy and at lambing may be poor, unless supplementary feeding is undertaken. A very cold wet winter may retard lamb growth. If the winter is dry and cold, supplementary feeding may be necessary.

It is considered that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages, and far outweigh the advantages of mating at other times of the year.

INTRODUCTION

The reason for running stock at all is to produce a profit. If by altering some factor nett profit can be increased, then that is sound business. But before doing so the whole schedule of operations must be considered, because it is possible to increase the return from some particular activity but, in doing so, detract more from another or make the whole organization more difficult and less profitable to run.

The reason for breeding is to provide the future wool growers. Dry sheep in finer wool breeds return more money per acre than breeding stock because of the lower cost of running them. Sufficient breeding to reproduce the flock at the right pace with adequate culling is all that is necessary.

Figures for reproductive rate and wastage shown in Table I indicate that a fall in net reproductive rate will mean either a reduction in the culling rate, which is undesirable, or breeding for another year from the ewes. It is because this reproductive rate on many properties is proving hard to maintain that there has been considerable research into every aspect of the reproduction of the flock.

In the light of this background to the problem, it is proposed to set out reasons why so many properties mate in the late spring/early summer and lamb in the late autumn, a period at which the maximum level of fecundity does not always occur. The dates used will be those of my own property as this is simpler from my own point of view, though in fact most Western District merino properties would have a season of about a fortnight to three weeks earlier in all their operations.

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TABLE I.

Sheep Available for Culling in Relation to Reproductive Rate and Wastage.

Wastage of ewes each year—4%			
Ewes available for mating	2 yr. old	1000	
	3 " "	930	
	4 " "	920	
	5 " "	880	
	Total	—	3760
Marking percentage		85	80
Total lambs marked		3196	3008
Ewe lambs marked		1598	1504
Losses to first shearing—3%	48		45
Shorn as lambs		1550	1459
Losses first to second shearing—5%	77		73
Shorn as 1 yr. old		1473	1386
Losses, second shearing to classing as 2 yr. old—2%	29		28
Available for classing		1444	1358
Required for mating		1000	1000
Available for culling—total	444		358
per cent.	30.7		26.3

SCHEDULE OF OPERATIONS

A schedule of routine operations which includes a May-June lambing is set out in Figure 1. There are a number of routine happenings which, occur year after year and which must dovetail together. There are, of course, other non-seasonal jobs which are fitted in at slack times and which are not necessarily urgent. All the items shown in the figure have to be done at or about the right time and some of the programme is immovable, as it is controlled by nature and the season. From the commencement of lamb marking, the pressure of work steadily increases up to December and any alterations in one factor must affect the work force available for another.

ADVANTAGES OF MAY-JUNE LAMBING

Within the outlined schedule of operations, a May-June lambing has the following advantages:

1. It fits into the overall plan better than any other than can be devised.
2. Lambs in general do reasonably well on it, provided--
 - (a) that a reasonable break in the weather occurs in the autumn; and
 - (b) that they are dropped before really rough, cold weather sets in. With pre-mating teasing with vasectomised rams this is very probable.

The lambs get a good start in reasonable weather. They grow slowly through July and jump away about August. They do very well up to shearing and have a good fleece when shorn. They are weaned on green feed and are accustomed to fend for themselves before they strike the summer. For best results it is advisable to feed the weaners from February to the autumn break. It is seldom necessary to feed the weaners in the winter.

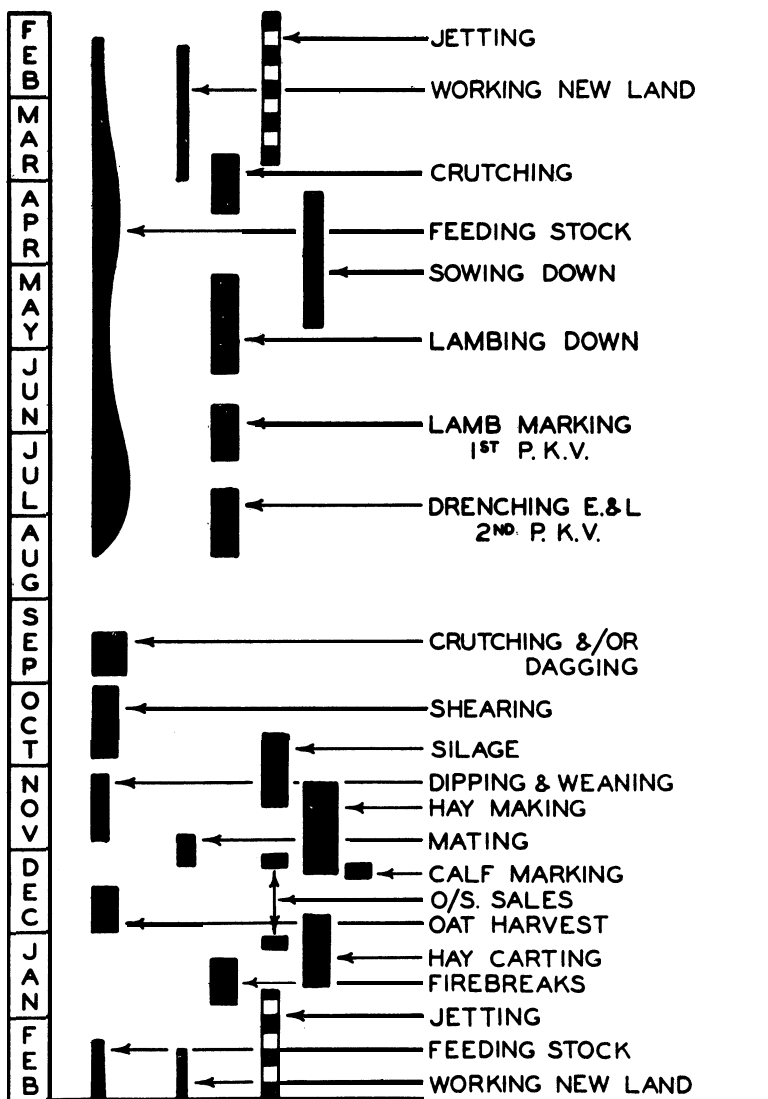


FIG. 1-A schedule of routine operations which includes a May- June lambing.

- The nutrition of the ewes is suitable for most of the time. They are in rising condition at mating owing to weaning and spring growth. With the use of vasectomised teasers, they take the ram reasonably well. During early pregnancy summer dry feed is quite adequate. The necessity for pre-lambing feeding depends on the extent and time of the autumn break, which can render this either essential or entirely unnecessary. The period when supplementary feeding is most necessary is in the depths of winter, to keep the milk supply going until the spring growth starts. The latter half of June up to August

is usually the critical period. From then on the feed usually is more than adequate and the lambs grow very quickly.

4. The ewes when starting to get too fat at weaning can be pulled off on to heavier stocking rates. This also allows the lambs to do better on their own, away from worms. The weaning of the lamb has a considerable flushing effect, especially when combined with shearing, not long before mating.
5. Shearing is carried out at the right period. Any earlier can be upset by mud and water, making it difficult to get sheep into the shed in condition fit to be shorn. The wool is at its peak for bloom and yield and will command maximum prices. When shorn later the wool tends to discolour, especially when held in store for a long time.
6. The variation in feed requirements of the whole flock throughout the year-the "season differential"-whatever its magnitude is well related to available feed. Total feed required is lowest from the middle of January when the last of the surplus sheep are sold and commences to rise in late March, early April, during the later stages of ewe pregnancy when the autumn break can be expected. It rises steadily and continuously until the off-shears sales take place late in the spring or in early December in my case.

The season differential in food requirements increases with the percentage of lambs marked relative to the total flock. Thus mating of maiden ewes at two years instead of the usual three years in this area increases it, as does selling wethers at an earlier age. It is possible, by lambing at other times of the year, for lambing percentages, and thus "season differential" to be greater, but the "season differential" may not occur in harmony with the pasture season. This factor and the shearing date are probably the two most potent arguments in favour of the autumn lambing programme.

DISADVANTAGES OF A MAY-JUNE LAMBING

1. Possibly poorer lambing, as the mating period is not that of highest fertility or fecundity.
In my opinion fertility is of more importance than fecundity, on the grounds that the rearing of one good, healthy lamb is better than two culls, which often result from twins.
With a flock such as my own that has been bred under these conditions for generations, it is generally still possible to maintain a reasonable lambing percentage. Trouble in doing so, where it has occurred, has generally been traced to other causes than failure to mate. In the stud flock, which always seems to be slightly below the flock in marking rates, the ewes carry excess condition at mating. Also, overweight of the lamb at birth, and consequent difficult parturition, may result in the loss of the lamb.
2. Possible poor pasture conditions at lambing as a result of the occurrence of a late autumn break. Provided action is taken early enough with supplementary feeding, this should not present any major problem.
3. Conditions in the winter. The usual cold wet winter conditions can retard the lamb growth and chop the condition of the ewes back so that they fail in their milk supply. Owing to the very wet conditions, supplementary feeding is mechanically difficult. Thus these conditions constitute one of the major disadvantages. However, the same conditions will affect lamb husbandry when mating is undertaken at most other dates which have been suggested except that in the winter for late spring lambing. A very dry, cold winter will stop pasture growth more seriously than cold wet conditions. However, it is possible to cart supplementary feed and these conditions therefore do not constitute such an insurmountable disadvantage.

DISADVANTAGES OF ALTERNATIVE TIMES OF MATING

(i) **Autumn mating, early spring** lambing.-The percentage of lambs marked may be higher, but the disadvantages outweigh this fact on most occasions, unless the difference is considerable.

Spring lambing further complicates the spring programme, as it condenses the essential operations into an even shorter period. It necessitates shearing later, thus clashing with harvesting. The clash with harvesting might reduce fodder conservations, which is an essential activity, while later shearing, though it adds weight to the wool, reduces bloom and thus price.

It has been suggested that shearing should be changed to autumn but this, too, has many disadvantages. Woolly sheep during the summer collect more dust and reduce the standard of wool produced. In the Western District, noted for its extra super wools, this is very important. In bad fire weather it would be impossible to muster sheep and thus the losses would be greater in even minor fires. Fly trouble, although controllable with modern jetting, adds to cost, as a result of the operation and reduced wool value from increased dust in the wool due to frequent yarding, and from poorer bloom in the wool.

If the spring lambing is early—say August—losses at lambing as the result of bad weather will be very high at times, as conditions are far rougher then in an average year than in the autumn.

(ii) **Mid winter lambing**.—Mid winter lambing in late June/July is subject to high lambing losses at birth. I have tried it under necessity during the war-time zoning of shearing, when it was not possible to start shearing until November 8. This meant that the ewes were not dipped and ready for mating until Christmas. The lambing losses were horrible.

(iii) **June mating for a November** Lambing.—There are several disadvantages that do not appear at any other lambing period.

- (1) Flies are active at both lambing and lamb marking periods and could be a major problem.
- (2) Feed requirements are poorly related to available feed. Total feed requirements start to rise rapidly from November, and though off-shears sales take off a major part, the food requirements rise all through the summer with the growth of the lamb.
- (3) The lambs in a late autumn are weaned on dry, poor feed at the worst period of the year.
- (4) The weaners at 15 months old are changing their teeth in February, when they have hard dry feed to contend with—a factor that may be of considerable importance.

CONCLUSION

It is considered that the normal programme outlined is basically the soundest from the most angles and should, year-in year-out, produce the best profits. For that reason I will need a lot of convincing about the necessity to do so, or very altered conditions, before I will change the programme very drastically,