GROWTH OF WEANER SHEEP IN RESPONSE TO HAND FEEDING AND STOCKING RATES ON FARMS IN THE LOW RAINFALL WHEATBELT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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In the low rainfall wheatbelt of Western Australia the quality and quantity of feed is limited during summer and autumn. Little, however, has been documented on how farmers manage the feed supply for their weaner sheep. The aim of this study was to measure the growth of Merino weaners over summer and autumn under different management strategies to identify problems that require future research and extension.

In January 1989, 100 ewes aged 7 to 11 months were selected at random in each of 10 Merino weaner flocks in the Merredin area (260 km east of Perth). The weaners were weighed and condition scored at 4-5 week intervals for 8 months.

Table 1 Effect of supplementation and stocking rate on the change in live weight and condition score of Merino ewe weaners *over* the summer/autumn period of 1989 in the Eastern wheatbelt of Western Australia

		Live weight (kg)		Condition score (0-5)			Feeding management			Summer stocking
Flock	Month born	Mid summer	Late autumn	Mid summer	Late autumn	Start of feeding	Type	Rate (kg/hd/wk)	Time (weeks)	rate (DSE/ha)
1	March	25.9	39.9	1.3	3.0	Dec	FB	0.12	13	0.8
2	May	26.3	30.2	2.0	2.6	Jan	FB	0.06	20	1.0
3	April	28.0	36.8	1.9	2.9	Feb	H	3.40		
							L	0.56	17	1.5
4	April	31.0	30.7	2.3	2.6	Jan	FB	0.35		
							H	1.0	4	1.3
							O	0.8		
5	April	33.5	36.6	2.2	2.6	March	L	0.7	16	NA
6	April	35.7	33.9	2.1	2.8	Jan	H	2.0		
							L	1.0	21	1.5
7	April	35.8	38.9	2.5	2.6	March	H	1.0		
							L	1.5	12	1.0
8	April	42.5	41.8	3.0	3.0	NF			NF	0.7
9	July	34.8	36.1	2.6	2.8	Feb	H	1.6		
							L	1.7	12	1.2
10	July	36.7	38.2	2.8	2.9	NF	-		NF	1.4

NA, not available; FB, fed protein based feed blocks; L, lupin seed; NF, not fed supplements; O, oat grain; H, cereal hay

Each flock had a condition score exceeding 2.5 by late autumn. Variation in live weight between flocks was 16.6 kg in mid summer and 11.6 kg in late autumn (Table 1). This resulted from different rates of supplementary feeding and varying access to cereal stubbles. In general, the lower the whole farm stocking rate in summer, the less grain supplements were fed due to greater access to stubbles. An economic evaluation is needed to determine which strategy maximizes profits.

The live weights in mid summer of some autumn born flocks was lower than expected, suggesting sub-optimal management of weaner flocks on dry pasture prior to stubbles becoming available. This needs further investigation.

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