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RAM RADDLING FOR COMMERCIAL FLOCKS

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This Bulletin has been re-issued in response to a number of requests for further information on methods of actual applying the raddle.

The practice of raddling rams during tugging is one worthy of more widespread adoption. It is not generally recognised that this practice, long established in stud flocks, has many practical advantages to offer the commercial sheep farmer whose sheep are kept under reasonably close supervision. Contrary to general opinion the method presents no difficulties to the vast majority of fat lamb and low country flocks.

Our interest in its possibilities has been quickened by the considerable losses of lambs experienced in flocks where ewes lambing during inclement weather cannot adequately be protected since lambing dates are not accurately known. A striking example of such losses can be quoted. A flock of 1,000 ewes on a Canterbury Plains farm due to lamb over a period of two months experienced a not-unusual southerly storm during the early stages of lambing. It was impossible to provide adequate lambing shelter for the whole flock. Consequently ewes about to lamb had to take their chance with others lambing at a later date. In one night alone, due to weather conditions, lambs representing 13 per cent of ewes died at or shortly after birth. Later losses during similar nights accounted for a further 11 per cent. The final lambing figure of 113 per cent thus would probably have been in the vicinity of 137 per cent but for these avoidable deaths.

Farmers are prone to accept such losses, which are not uncommon, as unavoidable. While this may be so under extensive hill country sheep farming conditions, it is certainly not so in the smaller flocks on the

better country. On such farms losses from this cause can be reduced to a negligible figure by adopting the practice of ram raddling at tugging to permit groups of ewes due to lamb at successive periods being drafted out and being provided with adequate protection during the critical period.

Ram raddling, or "keeling," consists simply of raddling the brisket and front belly wool of the ram so that the rump wool of each ewe is raddle-marked during service. The raddle is applied to the ram either in the form of a dry powder, in which case it is rubbed thoroughly into the brisket and belly wool, or as a paste made of raddle powder and oil mixed to the consistency of cream and applied with a brush or fiat board. Of the two methods the oil raddle gives the more reliable results, since it leaves a better defined and more permanent mark.

The raddle powders can be obtained from merchants who supply the paint trade and although powdered raddle may not be available there are a variety of coloured earth powders which do the job equally well. Where the oil mixture is to be used raw linseed oil or light mineral oil (40's) will be found satisfactory. Do not use boiled linseed oil, which will dry on the brisket of the ram almost immediately after it is applied, or waste engine oil which will irritate the brisket and cause the skin to scald.

A set of raddling harness has been recently imported from America where it has widespread use. The harness is simple in construction and promises to save much of the time now necessary to keep the brisket coloured.

A full description of the harness will be sent to interested farmers on application to the Animal

Husbandry Department, Lincoln College.

By the use of different raddle colours during successive periods of time ewes are automatically marked into "lambing groups." A convenient time for changing the raddle colour is every sixteen to seventeen days, the normal interval between heat periods in the ewe. This interval permits ewes returning to service being marked with the new colour. This necessitates the use of the colours in such a sequence that those used later will effectively cover the earlier ones where ewes have returned to service. Since the raddle is transferred to the ewe at service it is necessary to raddle all rams frequently. The best guide as to the frequency of raddling is the clearness with which the ewes are being marked. Experience indicates that rams raddled twice weekly will generally mark clearly all the ewes they serve. Since rams freshly turned out attempt to serve ewes indiscriminately, it is advisable, though not necessary, to withhold raddling until the morning following the turning out of the rams. Rams raddled when turned out may have the majority of their ewes falsely raddled during the first twenty-four hours. Apart from this giving a false impression as to the rapid progress of tupping, and later disappointment at the apparent return of marked ewes, this is really no serious disadvantage. Ewes thus falsely marked will be again marked with their true colour when they come into season.

Procedure

The detailed application of these general principles to a flock of 1,000 fat lamb producing ewes would be somewhat as follows:—

1. Since ewes are more conveniently and efficiently tupped under any system in small mobs the flock is divided into four mobs of 250 ewes.
2. Allowing the usual quota of 2 per cent rams, five rams are turned out with each mob of ewes. These are turned out unraddled in the evening.
3. The following morning each mob of ewes is rounded up, the rams caught, and raddled yellow. The use of this colour is continued as required for the next sixteen days.
4. On the seventeenth day the raddle colour is changed to blue.

The application of this colour is continued similarly for seventeen days.

5. At the end of this second seventeen day period the colour is changed to red for a further seventeen days.
6. By this time the majority of the ewes will have been served. The mobs are now boxed and "tailing up" rams turned out raddled black. As with the initial rams these latter are not raddled until they have been with the ewes overnight. Raddling is continued for a further seventeen days.
7. In case the raddle marks do not persist until lambing time the ewes are gone through after the rams have been taken out, and dot marked with branding paint according to their raddle colour. This is conveniently done at crutching time, provided crutching is not delayed too long after the rams have been taken out.

Use of the Information

The information given by the raddle marking can be made use of in many ways. Ewes which have been marked successively with each colour, together with unmarked ewes, are suspect dry ewes. These can be drafted from the rest of the flock immediately—a procedure impossible under usual conditions—and disposed of as fats during the winter. By doing so, advantage can be taken of the high prices ruling during this period of the year. If retained they can be given store treatment, thus releasing more feed for the in-lamb ewes. A word of warning is necessary here. Though it is highly probable that ewes which have returned to service four times will not be in lamb, a small proportion of these may have held to the last service. Such ewes, together with those raddled black only, would in any case lamb very late and might profitably be treated as dry ewes. Similarly a small proportion of the unmarked ewes may be in lamb, having been tupped successfully during the first twenty-four hours by the unraddled rams. These, however, being the earliest lambing ewes, will be easily distinguishable at crutching and should then be dot marked as members of the yellow raddle group.

Knowledge of approximate lambing dates enables the flock to be divided at an early date into two or more mobs to facilitate winter feeding and management. Over most

of the South Island supplementary feeding of ewes is essential and while it is desirable to feed all ewes well all the time, there is generally a critical feed period in July—the mid-winter month—which affects most the ewes in advanced pregnancy. During this time the yellow-blue mob should be given preferential treatment. With the approach of lambing the yellow blue mob can be further sub-divided and extra shepherding given where it is most needed, i.e., to the “close to lambing” yellow mob. With only a relatively small number of ewes known to be approaching lambing, and these in one mob, it is possible to provide adequate shelter and more constant attention. As it is definitely known that the blue, red and black raddled ewes will not lamb for some time, they can be grazed in the more distant fields or in less protected areas, and the shepherding required for their care reduced to a minimum. When the yellow group has been lambing for some ten to twelve days, the blue group can be drafted out and given the same close attention which has been bestowed upon the yellow group. Similarly, in their turn the red group and the black group will receive this attention.

It is at this stage that the small amount of extra work involved in raddling the rams during tupping is more than recompensed by the time and labour saved in shepherding the rest of the flock. This is

quite apart from the major advantage of a lowered lamb mortality emphasised earlier resulting from the extra attention which is available for the group actually lambing.

The fact that the flock is divided into relatively small mobs of ewes lambing at successive intervals makes possible the provision and use of lambing facilities generally considered to be impracticable under New Zealand conditions. The sheltered side of a plantation can be fenced with netting and, within this fenced yard, hurdle pens provided. On stormy nights the lambing mob can be confined within the sheltered netting yard while the hurdle pens are available for ewes with weak lambs.

Summary

1. Ram raddling offers a practical method of reducing lambing losses by permitting greater control of the flock at lambing time.
2. It enables more efficient management of the flock during the winter in that early lambing ewes can receive preferential winter treatment.
3. It makes possible the early drafting and sale at the high price period of dry ewes.
4. It requires a little more attention to the flock during the tupping period but this is more than compensated by the easier task during lambing.

Copies of this Bulletin may be obtained from the Secretary, Canterbury Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 187, Christchurch.