

Shearing of Pregnant Ewes Prior to Lambing

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Investigations carried out by the Wool Metrology Laboratory during the past few years have focused attention on the considerable loss (estimated at as much as £1,000,000) suffered by the sheep industry of New Zealand each year due to the presence of "breaks" in the wool fibre. Tentative conclusions reached after two years' investigation into the causes of "break" indicate that this occurs most frequently in breeding ewes, and at periods coinciding with the late winter season and lambing. The late shearing (November/December) of these ewes has the effect of placing the break relatively high in the staple, and thus producing a wool regarded by the manufacturer and wool buyer as "tender" or "showing a break in the staple," thereby limiting its use and reducing the value.

Information that ewes were being shorn prior to lambing in certain parts of West and Central Otago

was, therefore, received with some interest, and arrangements were made to carry out a preliminary survey of the practice. In all, ten properties were visited; four were mainly on hill country with native tussock pastures; four were Central Otago farms partly under irrigation, carrying improved swards of pedigree grass and clover; and two properties were on the heavier land of West Otago. Climatic conditions, too, varied from the relatively damp (40 inch rainfall) cold, winter conditions of Kelso to the extreme dry (15 inch rainfall) cold of the Maniototo Plains and Poolburn Valley areas, where frosts of 30° are recorded annually and where there is heavy snowfall. The hill country properties were lightly stocked with halfbred sheep with a 90 per cent. or lower lambing, while the heavier land carried as many as six Romneys to the acre with lambing percentages as high as 145 per cent.

TABLE I. LOCALITY AND CLIMATE.

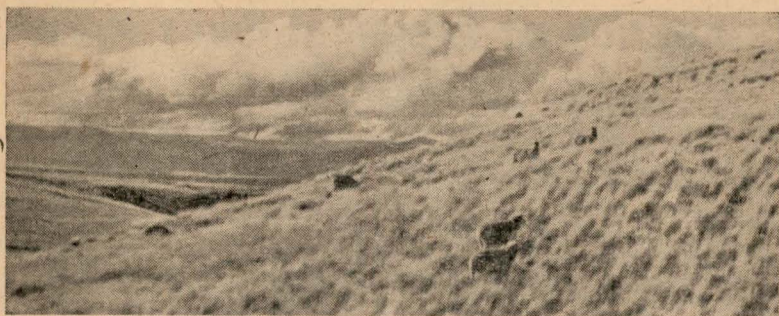
Farm	Location	Altitude Feet	Acreage	Breeding Ewe Flock Numbers
A	Maniototo Plains	1100	8500	3000
B	Maniototo Plains	1100-2000	3000	2700
C	Maniototo Plains	1283	1200	1407
D	Ranfurly	1000	4000	4000
E	Ida Valley	1000	750	1400
F	Poolburn	1000	1200	1700
G	West Otago	400-800	3000	4000
H	West Otago	400-1500	5000	2800
I	West Otago	700	900	1000
J	Kelso	400	1200	4000

TABLE II. TIME FOR SHEARING.

Farm	No. of years during which pre-lambing shearing has been carried out.	(approximate dates)	
		Shearing	Lambing
A	2 years	28th August	7th October
B	2	27th August	7th October
C	3	15th September	1st October
D	4	up until lambing	5th October
E	5	15th August	5th October
F	5	25th August	1st October
G	14	15th September	15th October
H	4	7th September	15th October
I	4	1st September	14th October
J	14	1st September	7th September

The general opinion expressed by the farmers was that no harm resulted even when shearing was delayed until immediately prior to

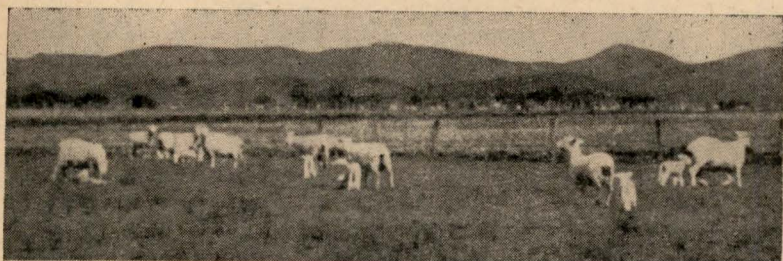
lambling, but in all cases, an endeavour was made to shear two weeks before lambing was due to commence.



Half-bred ewes on tussock country in the Maniototo Plains, April, 1946.



Ewe flock in Poolburn area photographed in April, 1946. The absence of good shelter is noticeable.



Early shorn ewes with lambs in Southland.

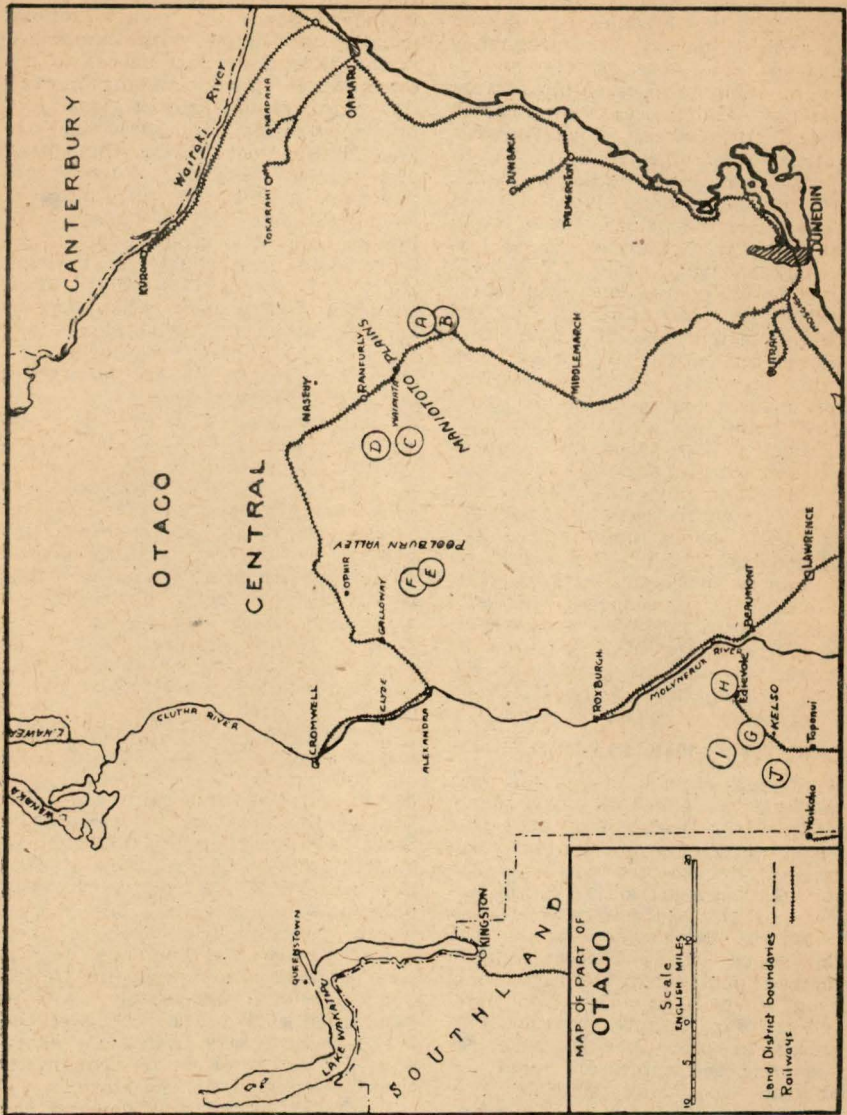
TABLE III.

TREATMENT OF SHEEP.

Farm	Shearing (Blades or Machines)	Treatment Immediately after Shearing.
A	Favours blades	No shedding; contour shelter only.
B	Machine	No shedding; shelter only.
C	Blades	No shelter; no shedding.
D	Machines No. 1 combs	Has shedded ewes for four nights.
E	Machines	No shedding; no shelter.
F	Machines	Shed 1 night only if broken weather; no shelter.
G	Machines (recom- mends No. 2 combs)	No shedding; little shelter.
H	Blades	Sheds 1 night if necessary; poor shelter.

I Machines
 J Blades

Sheds if absolutely necessary; contour shelter only.
 Sheds if absolutely necessary; good shelter.



Location of properties which shear before lambing that were visited.

Except on property J there was a noticeable lack of plantations, and live fences. Although five of the farms investigated have shedded ewes after shearing for varying periods of one to four nights if they experienced broken weather, no claim was made that there was any advantage in so doing. The remaining farmers were emphatic that this precaution was unnecessary. Moreover, on only one farm was there good hedge shelter—on the remainder, reliance was placed on the natural contour shelter provided in gullies and on tussock faces. All were in agreement, how-

ever, that shearing should not be continued until too late in the day and that shorn ewes be given access to good and ample feed before nightfall.

No case of serious sheep losses following early shearing were encountered, and no evidence was found that such losses had occurred. Indeed, it was claimed that losses attributable to bad weather following shearing were significantly less for early shearing.

Ewe and lamb mortality, and lambing percentages were investigated but owing to the lack of precise records, reliance had to be

placed on the opinions of the farmers concerned. There was general agreement that ante-lambing trouble had diminished as a direct result of the fact that a shorn ewe during this critical period of pregnancy tends to take more exercise. Although lambing percentages were unaltered, lamb losses were reduced through the ewes, during broken weather, remaining with the lambs in whatever shelter was available. Although some ewes became cast before early shearing, losses from cast ewes were claimed to be less in early shearing flocks. The ewes did not, of course, get cast after shearing, and all farmers agreed that less attention and labour were required for the lambing period, e.g., during the war years, one farmer lambled down 4000 ewes single handed with 130 per cent. of lambs at weaning. There was no evidence whatever that handling the ewes late in pregnancy was detrimental. Since the shorn ewes do not get cast, less shepherding is required during lambing, and, as a result, on hill country properties in particular, mis-mothering is reduced. Similarly, the absence of a muster and separation of the lambs from the ewes at shearing favours the growth of the lambs, while there is no check in the lactation at a critical period.

EFFECT ON THE FLEECE.

There was a lack of reliable data regarding the effect of early shearing upon the fleece, but there was general agreement on the total absence of breaks and cotts. The wool was more attractive in appearance and the estimated yield was reputed to be higher than in the later shorn clips. Fleece weights remained unchanged after the first season when 10 months' wool only is shorn. In a few instances, an increase in price per lb. was recorded and the appraisers remarked that the wool was suitable for speciality lines. Prices made available from a high altitude property carrying 1700 sheep showed an increase from 14d to 18d which could in part at least be credited to the practice of early shearing.

SUMMARY.

A preliminary investigation of shearing prior to lambing has been carried out. Although the practice is well established in Central Otago and West Otago, factual data were difficult to obtain, and more complete records are required before many of the claims put forward can be substantiated. With the help and co-operation of a Canterbury farmer, it is anticipated that more accurate data will be obtained dur-

ing the coming season.

The general opinion was that the practice has no disadvantages, while the advantages claimed for it include absence of ewe troubles usually associated with lambing—lambs have immediate access to the ewe's udder—lower lambing mortality, more rapid growth rate of lambs resulting from less disturbance of the flock during the spring and summer months. Further advantages gained are the improved wool clip due to the absence of breaks and cotts, reduced labour requirements, particularly at lambing time, and absence of the usual shearing interference with urgent spring cultivation for supplementary crops and with hay making.

If the practice of early shearing is contemplated, provision of adequate feed supplies is essential. It is recommended that a good grass pasture be shut up in the late summer months on to which the shorn ewes can be placed immediately after shearing; supplementing this pasture with good quality hay is advisable. Shearing should be stopped reasonably early each day to allow the shorn sheep time for grazing before nightfall. In all cases, this feature of management was stressed if losses were to be avoided.

In the first season of early shearing, a loss on the average of from $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. to 1 lb. of wool per ewe must be anticipated, according to the time of the previous shearing, since there is approximately ten months' growth of wool shorn. The limited time in which shearing must take place is worth noting, while broken weather during early spring in some districts may lengthen the normal time shearing takes. Owing to the open nature of the staple, care in handling, skirting and rolling of the fleeces is necessary with early shorn clips if the wool is to appear attractive on reaching the store.

Increased prices and demand for early shorn "cast for age ewes" have been recorded owing to their attractive appearance (and/or extra wool) at ewe fair sales.

On the basis of the experience of these farmers, it would appear that the practice has possibilities from a purely practical point of view, when the standard of general management of the breeding flock is high. The collection of data over a number of years is necessary to establish in more precise terms, many of the advantages which are claimed. The present publication, therefore, is not a recommendation but an attempt to summarise for the benefit of those interested, the information now available.