Proceedings of the New Zealand Grassland Association 46: 47-50 (1985)

FINISHING LAMBS ON BORDER DYKE IRRIGATION

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BACKGROUND

Finishing iambs to produce a bigger dollar sign is a challenge to all sheep farmers. Around the beginning of 1980 life had become a little dull and we thought a change was necessary. So, after some haggling a 620 ha property was bought. It tended to be a little bedraggled as we could only keep three mobs of sheep apart but after putting on sixty-five gates, digging in thirty-one strainers and mending fifty-four broken wires, we ended up with forty-three paddocks ranging in size from one to twenty-five hectares.

The property lies on the coast some 8 kms north of where the Waitaki river flows into the Pacific Ocean. The soil is of the poorer Steward type, with a pH of 5.5 and phosphate reading of 5-8, and is situated at the lower end of the Morven-Glenavy irrigation scheme.

The property had 230 hectares border dyked, with pasture quality ranging trom a good ryegrass/white clover to a very hungry looking browntop/hair grass/sub clover stony mess. The dryland had a lot of sub clover throughout, but did not produce unless it rained for three days or the irrigation water got loose.

The first lambing in 1980, with 6300 sheep to the ram resulted in about 500 dry ewes and a 93% lambing. We did our best to fatten these lambs but because there wasn't enough good pasture and we were hoping to make some hay, a lot of these lambs were killed around 11.5 to 12.5 kg returning some $14 to $16 per head.

DEVELOPMENT

First Season, 1980-81

The 1980-81 summer saw another 82 ha border dyked and sown down with 20 kg Nui ryegrass, 4 kg Pitau white clover, 2 kg Timothy and 4 kg cocksfoot/ha. Fertilizer was 500 kg superphosphate and 5 tonne of lime/ha. Most of the sowing was done around the February/March period, this giving a good amount of pre lamb feed.

Second Season, 1981-82

The new border dykes were given another 500 kg of superphosphate/ha in the spring with the older border dykes receiving the same and the better dryland 125 kg/ha. Yes, all of this did give us some good lamb feed after just making the 100% lambing that season, but because half of our sheep tended to be too small, and with another 125 ha going to be border dyked, we decided to sell most of that seasons lambs forward so that we could feed our sheep and what lambs we had left.

At this stage, we had 6000 ewes, minus what went to the works as old ewes; running them on approximately half of the property with the other half being developed into border dykes or in dryland. Dryland on the coast in the Morven-Glenavy area does not produce much feed during those dry summer months.

Third Season, 1982-83

As a result of the 125 ha border dyked and the 225 tonnes of superphosphate spread about in the 1981182 summer, the pastures around the farm were starting to show signs of a marked improvement towards being able to fatten any number of lambs. The result was 5750 lambs to the works with a net return of $22.60 per head.

Our third season of border dyking saw another 85 ha being developed, with 18 ha being sown to 5 kg Pawera red clover and 15 kg Matua prairie grass/ha with the

remaining 67 ha sown out to 22 kg Nui ryegrass, 4 kg cocksfoot and 4 kg Pitau white clover/ha.

The winter to follow was quite a normal one with 4000 ewes fed on turnips, Tama and hay; 1500 two tooths on grain oats and good silage and then onto green feed oats and good hay; and 1200 older and/or thinner sheep on greed feed oats and hay. This gave a total of 6700 ewes to the ram. Yes, all of this feed does cost some dollars, but unless you feed your sheep 12 months of the year, I believe you will find it difficult to get a top return for lambs in as short a period as possible. If a ewe is not fed during the winter she will lack considerably in milk production for her lamb.

Table 1: IRRIGATION DEVELOPMENT SUMMARY

Season	Area Developed (ha)	Total Irrigated Area	% of Farm Irrigated
1979180	Farm Purchased	230	37
1980181	82	312	50
1981/82	125	437	70
1982183	85	522	84
1983184	—	522	84

SHEEP AND RAM SELECTION

Our sheep over these developing years have consisted of a large difference in type and quality, but would be graded as Border-cross to Coopworth. We are now using Coopworth rams over all the two tooths and approximately half of the main flock. Romney rams go to the ewes with the very open faces, and a rangey Black Face to the ewes that should have been culled out because of quality.

When selecting rams, I believe you should by big rams; you should buy bone, meat and wool. There has been too much emphasis put on whether their ears feel right, or if they have white or pink eye lashes. I sometimes think there should be more stud breeders, because we see so many times the best 25% of their rams, are the only rams, that should be used for breeding.

It is no wonder there are so many over fat problems because everyone of us, is guilty of breeding from rams that are too small, too fat and not long enough. It is thoughtless that some breeders are still being allowed to sell this inferior product.

MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTION WITH IRRIGATION 1983184 SEASON

Lamb Management

Our ewes and ewe hoggets are off grass for nine to ten weeks during the winter. Because of this our ewes can go onto grass which is up to 100 mm long, during the 7-14 days period prior to lambing. At this time, the ewes are spread over the whole farm with an average of 125 in each paddock.

The grass on our border dykes starts to grow around August 20th, and growth is really getting under way by mid-September. Don't lamb too early, or at least not without prospects of enough grass. We start lambing on the 15th September with three shepherds, myself included. Some sheep were set stocked and some were shedded out each day. There was no difference in the lambing percentage of the two systems. Apart from a 500 lamb loss over three wet days the lambing was quite a normal one with the tailing figure being 7400 lambs or 110%.

I prefer to tail in mobs of about 250 ewes, but if we are getting behind in our tailing, this ewe mob size may be increased to about 350. These ewes and lambs stayed in their tailing mobs and were given as much feed as possible. This was

achieved by rotating each mob around 3 to 5 paddocks, and gave an extra build up of good grass before weaning took place during the second week of December.

Lamb Grazing and Management

Lambs at weaning are drafted into four lines, ewe lambs, good wether lambs, smaller wether lambs and smalls regardless of sex. The lambs are drenched every three weeks from then until the very last lambs have gone to the freezer. We have not had a real worm problem, because we constantly observe the situation and do not put them in those paddocks too thickly. It is worthwhile to send away samples to have worm counts taken. If you have an unweaned mob with sheep or lambs in it that need drenching, don't just drench the lambs, because when you are drenching lambs, and think you may have missed one, you do it again, "don't you?".

When we get that drenching gun off our backs we put the lambs in mobs no greater than 300, in fact some paddocks may only have 50 put in them. They would be set stocked from 20 to 40 per hectare depending on the feed quality and whether my mind was happy with the situation. The dryland paddocks which have almost no feed in them may have 12 lambs put in each, and these do quite well. The lambs stayed in these lines apart from some small adjustments until the 2nd January.

All lambs were then returned to yards and drenched. I then set off around the farm with these lambs putting 50 into here, 220 into there, 175 over there and so on until all lambs were spaced around the farm. The next day, I would set off on my quiet Honda 110 with one of my strong eyed heading dogs to take stock of the situation, with the big mob of ewes very much to the fore in my mind, because they have got to be fed almost as well as the lambs. The ewes and rising two tooths would be given the grassier type of pasture regardless of pasture age. Those 30 lambs that were sitting beside the gate or perhaps the 95 that were lying under the unfenced trees, or the 25 too many in another paddock would all have to be taken out and put elsewhere.

Around that December-January period, we may have sheep or lambs in every paddock except the area that is shut up for hay which could be around 70 hectares. In 83/84 15,000 bales were made. I may take the lambs out of a paddock just prior to putting a mob of ewes in it. I do not have any real set pattern with adult stock. They may be in one corner today and on the other side of the farm tomorrow. We apply water at 14 to 17 day intervals and this is done regardless of whether stock are in the paddocks.

If lambs are going to become prime and heavy they have got to be happy. The day your Mum lost you at the Christchurch show amongst the crowd of 10,000, I believe you and your Mum were still worrying and partly fretting about the problem for some time after you were back together. This is just the same as shifting a big mob of lambs every day, or could we liken it to the shepherd on the wild two stroke motor bike or the dog that didn't have a complete education. I believe it is not possible for lambs to fatten quickly in big mobs; there is just too much stress; the old saying, "A sheep's worst enemy is another sheep".

You may ask what about pasture control? There is 12 months to look after that, but only 4 months to get those dollars for lambs. The lambs stayed in their paddocks until January 21, which is when they came in for the first draft when 1500 were marked to go and 1200 of them killed out at $2535 or 15.3 kg.

The lambs remaining on the place were drenched and then I did exactly the same as I did three weeks earlier, 50 into that paddock, 125 over there and so on. Yes, there would be lambs going back into paddocks that they had come out of. I do not believe they would have done any better if I had doubled up the mob size and put them onto clean pasture each time after drenching, because we were doing the same type of management with our ewe lambs and participating in a MAF drenching trial which included a worm count. These ewe lambs had live weights of 38 kg on March 22 and 42 kg two months later. They were drenched at monthly intervals from March through to June, when the worm count was 'nil'.

All our our freezer lambs must be off the property by the end of April. This year our average for 5600 was 14.97 kg or $24.63 per head, which represented 139 kg per hectare of lamb meat to the freezer.

I believe that set stocking and having the availability of water to provide plenty of feed are key factors in being able to produce prime heavy lambs on border dyke irrigation farm land.