24 Lamb and Sheep Skins

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Learning objectives

On completion of this topic you should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the management factors that will improve returns from lamb and sheep skins.

24.1 Introduction

Skins are a valuable product of the lamb and sheep industry and contribute from 0 to 30% of the total return from lamb and mutton. Lamb skin prices are usually higher in July-September as manufacturers of sheep skin rugs buy their requirements for the entire year over a few months, these skins are normally purchased from the new season lambs. In southeast Australia this coincides with the time when grass seed problems and ultra violet light degradation of the tip are at their lowest. Sheep skin rugs are a high value product exported around the world.

This seasonal buying focuses on unshorn second cross lambs with little colour or vegetable fault in the wool. Prices may not always be so high for first cross skins or at other times of the year but a few simple management guidelines can always be followed. These will ensure the value of skins is as high as possible at the time of slaughter.

Table 24.1 Traditional markets for first and second cross lamb skins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wool length (cm)</th>
<th>Initial process</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>VM allowed</th>
<th>Further processing</th>
<th>End Product**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater than 7.5</td>
<td>*fellmonger</td>
<td>Wool</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>Woollen products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than 7.5</td>
<td>Scour</td>
<td>Woolly skins</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Floor rugs unshorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0-7.5</td>
<td>Fellmonger</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>1%B, 0%S</td>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Leather suede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0-7.5</td>
<td>Fellmonger</td>
<td>Wool</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>Woollen products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-5.0</td>
<td>Scour</td>
<td>Woolly skin</td>
<td>1%B, 0%S</td>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Medical rugs seat covers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5-2.5</td>
<td>Scour</td>
<td>Woolly skin</td>
<td>1%B, 1%S</td>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Footwear Ug boots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2.5</td>
<td>Scour</td>
<td>Woolly skin</td>
<td>F, NF</td>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Wool coats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Fellmongering is the chemical process of removing wool from a skin
** Except for some floor rugs, all woolly skins are trimmed to a uniform length/depth
*** As for normal shorn wool B-Burr; S-Shive (seed), F-Free, NF-Nearly Free

24.2 Skin quality

Wool length

The majority of Merino skins are not processed into wool-on skins. This is due mainly to the poor quality of skins from older animals. When sheep are being sold at times other than around normal shearing time, the decision must be made to either shear before sale or sell them in the wool.

If sheep are shorn before sale then the grower will be paid on the sale of the wool – but bare shorn pelts are worth very little. Premature shearing yields less and lower value wool per sheep with shorter staple length. The value of sheep skins increase as wool length increases, so there is a point at which premature shearing becomes uneconomic compared to selling sheep in the wool.

Study market reports for skins and wool prices to establish the price for short staple wool. The most appropriate shearing strategy can be decided using information from your past wool records and using current wool prices. As a general rule it is unlikely you will recover the cost of shearing wool less than 50mm in length.
24.3 Improving skin value

Avoid pigmented sires
Black fibres in the fleece of lambs reduce the skin and wool value considerably. Even black fibres at the points reduce skin value.

Vaccination
Vaccinate behind the ear so a possible blemish can be easily trimmed from the pelt or the carcase. Do not vaccinate along the back, shoulder or inside the hind leg, as these are high value parts of the of the carcase and skin.

External parasites
Control lice, flystrike, fleece rot and dermatitis to maximise skin value.

Curfew times
Keep sheep off feed and water for at least 12 hours before trucking to minimise faecal staining in transit. If coming off very lush feed consider feeding good quality hay for two days before loading.

Timing
Consider changing time of shearing to before seed set to reduce seed contamination. Allow 6 weeks if possible before slaughter to ensure a wool length of a minimum half inch (12mm). In some instances it can be beneficial to use ‘snow’ or ‘cover’ combs as they leave approximately 5mm of extra wool length which is equivalent to about four weeks of growth.

Pests
Control lice, flystrike, fleece rot and dermatitis to minimise matting of the wool.

Diet
Minimise faecal stain by controlling worms, and by avoiding sudden changes in diet.

Burrs and grass seeds
If possible, graze lambs in paddocks that are free of burrs and grass seed. To reduce contamination consider using the management tool of spray topping of grassy pastures eg. barley grass, vulpia.

Crutching
Avoid full crutching, or you could lose several dollars in skin value. A narrow crutch under the tail (a ‘bung-hole’ crutch) will maximise the skin value, this includes a blow inside the back legs but not a full crutch over the tail. Crutch lambs and sheep at-least four days before sale this will assist in avoiding stress. Do not send sheep for sale with unhealed or infected wounds.
Spray markers and raddle
These are used to identify sheep for sale and are best applied on the wig or nose of the animal, not the middle of the back. Lamb skins are processed at lower temperatures than that of wool scouring, so traces of the mark can remain on the processed skin.

Dust
During the autumn, in some parts of Australia, dust contamination in skins can cause quality assurance problems for processors. Try to minimise dust contamination on farm.

Estimated skin value
Using the above information you should be able to contact skin buyers and check skin market reports to estimate skin values.

24.4 Assessing sheep and lambs for grass seed contamination
When marketing lambs or sheep that have had access to any areas of pasture that contains grass seeds that are likely to contaminate the wool, skin or carcase it is important to assess for the amount of grass seed in the wool. The most likely seeds to contaminate are those from native species such as wiregrass, spear grass/ corkscrew, barley grass or crowfoot/ geranium.

It is not possible to be totally accurate in predicting whether or not grass seeds have penetrated the skin and therefore the carcase, but assessing the animal to check for evidence and relative quantity of seed in the wool will be a reasonable indicator. Care should be taken to closely inspect the animal on the brisket, neck, shoulders, belly, legs and lower ribs. These are the most likely areas to retain seeds. Some grass seeds will fall out of the wool over time but others may in fact have penetrated the skin.

Shorn lambs or sheep may appear to be clean, but may have had grass seeds penetrate the skin or muscle prior to shearing. On inspection these will probably not be seen, so shorn animals should be considered in relation to their known grazing history. If they have been on pastures that have contained problem species and these have set seed during the grazing period, it should be considered that the animals might have some seed penetration.

Industry standards for the description of the level of seed contamination of the fleece were developed for Computer Aided Livestock Marketing (CALM) in the early 1990s. Quantity of seed observed can be indicated as either:

• None observed
• Light (very few seeds on belly, lower points, and brisket)
• Medium (moderate numbers of seeds on belly, brisket, flanks)
• Heavy (obvious large number of seeds over most of the body)

When seeds of the problem species are seen, penetration of the skin or carcase is very likely.

1. Brisket, shoulder, neck
2. Lower rib, belly
3. Hind leg, breech
4. Head
24.5 Summary

The main factors affecting skin value are:
- wool length
- wool quality
- seed and burr contamination
- breed
- dark fibre contamination
- shearing cuts
- skin weight and area
- misuse of brands and markers
- over crutching
- faeces, dust and urine stain

Readings
There are no readings for this topic.

Activities
Available on WebCT

Multi-Choice Questions
Submit answers via WebCT

Useful Web Links
Available on WebCT

Assignment Questions
Choose ONE question from ONE of the topics as your assignment. Short answer questions appear on WebCT. Submit your answer via WebCT

Summary
- In developed countries meat consumption is static, though share of different meats may change
- In developing countries meat consumption is rising as income rises
- Some countries traditionally eat more red meat than others, regardless of income
- Most countries produce only enough meat for their own consumers
- Australia is a major exporter of sheep meat
- Middle Eastern and Asian countries are Australia’s major markets for sheep meat, with the USA being a major market for lamb, but not mutton.
- Grainfeeding of sheep is increasing
- Mutton is essentially a by-product of the wool industry
- NSW is the largest producer of mutton
- NSW and Victoria are the largest producers of lamb.

References
Hancock, B. and Gale, G., ‘Winning against seeds.’ PIRSA and Meat and Livestock Australia, and the Government of South Australia.