Relationship between face cover and grass seed infestation of the eyes and jaws in Merino weaners

J. C. Greeff[AB], *N. S. Stanwyck*[A], *A. C. Schlink*[C] *and L. J. E. Karlsson*[D]

[A]Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, South Perth WA 6151 Australia
[B] Email: johan.greeff@dpird.wa.gov.au
[C] 29 Carrick Street, Woodlands WA 6018
[D]RMB 314, Bridgetown WA 6009

The presence of grass seeds after pasture senescence is a constant problem in the winter rainfall regions of southern Australia. Grass seeds can lodge in sheep's eyes and with secondary infections making a significant contributor to blindness in young sheep. Grass seeds also penetrate the skin causing ill-thrift (Little *et al*. 1993) and resulting in the down grading of skins and carcasses (Scobie, 2010). This study was carried out to characterise the relationship between face cover score at weaning and the incidence of abscesses and infections due to grass seeds in the eyes and jaws of affected weaners.

897 Merino ewe and ram lambs were weaned and separated into two adjoining paddocks in November 2012 on the Department of Agriculture of WA research station at Mt Barker, WA. These paddocks contained a relatively high proportion of barley grasses (*Hordeum glaucum* and *Heteropogon lepoinum*), as a result of the early finish to the growing season. After the lambs were placed on the paddocks, the pasture senesced very quickly during an intense dry spell before management systems to control seed development could take place. During subsequent routine inspections, a high proportion of lambs had grass seeds in their eyes and their jaws were swollen from the development of jaw abscesses. The affected jaws were treated by lancing and draining the abscesses, and administering antibiotics until the weaners recovered. The number of animals infected, number of treatments carried out separately for the eyes and jaw were recorded. Face cover (WFACE) was scored at weaning from 1 (open) to 5 (wool covered) using AWI Sheep Score manual. Half scores were recorded where appropriate.

No significant differences (P > 0.05) were found between males and females (confounded with paddock), and between sire progeny groups (P > 0.05) for any of the grass seed jaw and eye problems. Face cover had no effect on the incidence of eye damage (P > 0.05) or infestation of grass seeds (P>0.05). However, weaner lambs with a **high** face cover score had a **lower** incidence (P < 0.01) of grass seed induced jaw abscesses and received **less** jaw treatments (P < 0.01) than lambs with **low** face cover scores.

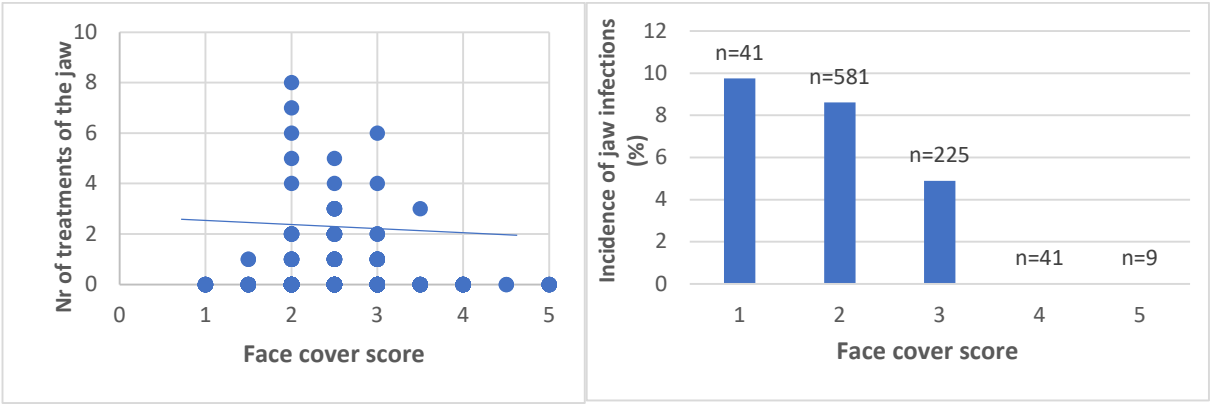

Figure 1. Number treatments of the jaw (= 2.57 – 0.05 * WFACE) and the incidence of jaw abscesses in Merino weaner lambs affected by grass seeds at different face cover scores.

The results indicate that grass seed and damage to the eyes appear to be random events. However, high face covered sheep had a lower incidence of jaw abscesses and also received less jaw treatments. This indicates that lambs with a high face cover appears to be protected against grass seeds causing abscesses.

References

Little DL, Carter ED and Ewers AL (1993) *Wool Technology and Sheep Breeding*. **41**,369-378.
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