Industry perceptions of health issues in containment-fed ewes

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The recent drought has resulted in many breeding ewes being fed in containment areas, and an increased need for information on management. Comprehensive guidelines on sheep management in containment areas are available (DEDJTR, 2018). However, there is a lack of recent information on the current practices used by industry, limiting the ability to target appropriate information for producers. In particular, health issues are a concern given the possibility of ewes being in lower body condition than normal, and the probability of feeding high-grain rations for long periods. The aim of this project was to identify current practices used for containment management and define industry perceptions of health issues and their management.

A forum was held with six producers/consultants invited from across NSW, VIC, SA, and WA, selected for their industry experience and knowledge of containment feeding. The participants were asked to identify typical industry practices and identify key health concerns. Participants perceived that the welfare of ewes was generally improved by containment feeding, due to frequent monitoring and the provision of maintenance nutrition. Grazing of inadequate pastures, in comparison, was reported to sometimes result in an undesirable loss of condition score, which could result in poor reproductive performance. The mortality rates for containment-fed ewes were considered to be dramatically lower than grazing ewes, with an estimated rate of 0.1%, and generally below 1% during the time (variable) in containment. The key causes of death were reported as misadventure, acidosis, and pregnancy toxaemia. Other respiratory signs reported were coughing, pneumonia, and keratoconjunctivitis (pinkeye), likely resulting from exposure to dust. Occasional incidents of abortion could be traced to listeriosis, toxoplasmosis, or campylobacteriosis, indicating a need for additional care with feed quality or site selection, a potential benefit from not feeding on the soil, and vaccination as risk management strategies. Other practices that participants reported were not always adopted, or required better guidelines for, are shown in Table 1.

Issues
Adequately introduce rams as well as ewes to containment ration, care with changing feed batch or quantity
Test for water quality (e.g. excess mineral, bacterial/algal toxins)
Monitor/test feed quality (e.g. energy, mould, phytoestrogens, toxins) and monitor ewe condition
Need to provide adequate roughage to reduce shy feeders and prevent acidosis
Feed separate mobs of young, different breeds, or lower condition ewes to reduce shy feeders
Add calcium (and magnesium for last 4 weeks of pregnancy) to high grain diets
Adequate nutrition/fibre/slow change in diet when removing ewes from containment
Vaccinate for enterotoxaemia pre-entry and exit
Drench for worms on entry, and monitor faecal egg counts
Provision of shade to prevent heat stress – what is the impact and how much is needed?
Shy feeders need to be identified and removed, but what is the level and how to reduce the incidence?

Table 1. Containment-feeding practices recommended, but which were not always adopted by producers.

Many of the health issues reported are similar to those identified in earlier reports (Morbey and Ashton 1990). The findings of the present study indicate that while the health of ewes in containment appears to be generally good and the industry recognises many of the contributing factors, there is still a need for on-going provision of guidelines to assist producers to minimise common health issues. In some cases, further research is needed to clarify optimal management.

References

DEDJTR (2018) *Drought feeding and management of sheep – a guide for farmers and land managers 2018*. Victorian Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, Melbourne, VIC.

Morbey A, Ashton B (1990) *Lot feeding of sheep on Eyre Peninsula during the 1988 drought. Technical Report No. 155.* Department of Agriculture South Australia, SA.

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