

2000/V05



## Producer Research Support

### Lamb Weaning Strategies

Goorambat Prime Lamb Group



### The project

Because of the diverse enterprise mixes of the properties in the region, members of the Goorambat Prime Lamb Group used a number of different weaning strategies. Some producers weaned lambs as early as three months old. Producers were unsure of the relative benefits of each system, and wished to determine which approach was optimal for specific enterprise composition and conditions.

Published information relates specifically to Rutherglen or Hamilton, which is not necessarily relevant to producers in the Goorambat region. Group members were keen to gather and analyse information on weaning systems that were relevant to the Goorambat district and their own properties.

### Objectives

1. provide all group members with the skills to be able to conduct and evaluate a range of weaning systems and management techniques for prime lamb enterprises;
2. increase live animal assessment skills, pasture assessment skills, and objective evaluation of management techniques, of all group members.
3. measure the effects of different weaning strategies on lamb growth and pasture utilization by comparing the outcomes of best practice weaning systems against those of current practice;
4. of the available information, determine what, if any, is relevant to the Goorambat region;
5. identify the weaning system that best suits each group member's property and business;
6. encourage producers to find and identify relevant information, that can be implemented to enhance individual enterprises; and
7. create a broader understanding of some of the practices that are used in other regions and the advantages and disadvantages of these practices.

### What was done?

#### Methodology

1. Discussed and recorded current weaning practices of each group member.
2. Invited guest speakers to present on current best practice weaning strategies for prime lamb enterprises. Speakers presented explanations about preparation of sheep for joining, current weaning practices, ram harness usage and Lambplan.
3. Bus tour to selection of trial properties. Group members gained an understanding of how the trial was being run and were encouraged to improve their pasture and animal assessment skills.

The Goorambat Prime Lamb Group ran a series of workshops and trials to understand and evaluate the relative benefits of a range of weaning systems and management techniques for prime lamb enterprises.

Early weaned lambs (eight to nine weeks old) achieved the same or better final weights than late weaned lambs (12 weeks and older). Members also learned about the parasite burdens of weaners.

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## Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

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4. Bus tour to other districts to discuss weaning practices with other producers, and gain a greater understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each of these practices. A three day tour was held to visit the south west region. The producers visited were selected because they employed different weaning strategies, were aiming at different markets and specifications, and had some focus on lamb production.

During the tour, group members reflected on what they observed and related learning to individual situations. Issues, such as the effect of management techniques to increasing ewe fertility and optimise lambing, were also discussed.

Each participant contributed to an information booklet that was circulated to interested group members.

5. Six group members participated in a trial of weaning strategies. Each producer weaned lambs using two different techniques - the current practice of the property and a reported best practice system.

### Weaning Systems Used

1. **Identify early/late lambers and wean according to age.**

Early/late lambers were identified using harnesses (change colour at three weeks) or scanning. Ewes were separated prior to lambing and lambs were marked, weighed and identified at six weeks.

Fifty percent of the early lambs were weaned at 12 weeks, and 50 percent of the late lambs (eight weeks old) were weaned on the same day.

The remaining 50 percent of the early lambs were weaned at 15 weeks with the rest of the late lambs (12 weeks old).

2. **Weaning according to time from lambing.**

The trial lambs were identified through harnessing rams, or drifting at lambing so that the age difference of the group was no more than three weeks. Two groups of lambs were weaned at a predetermined time from the first drop. The first group was weaned according to best practice and the second according to the normal practice of each enterprise participating in the trial.

### What happened?

Early weaned lambs (eight to nine weeks old) achieved the same or better final weights than late weaned lambs (12 weeks and older).

The range of results reported may be attributed to factors other than early weaning.

1. **Selection of trial groups**

Some producers selected early/late weaning groups according to size/age. This meant that the late weaned lambs were younger than the early weaned lambs. Both these trials showed significant weight gains for the late weaned lambs.

2. **Worm burden**

High worm burdens on two properties resulted in lower growth rates.

3. **Pasture availability**

One participant had difficulty providing good quality pastures to both trial groups. Other participants also noted that this was an issue.

Lambs weaned early were more prone to worms. Weight increases of early weaned lambs were more substantial soon after weaning. This was of importance to producers of trade weight lambs, but producers of export weight lambs didn't perceive that early weaning was a disadvantage to final weight.

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## MLA also recommends

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### Goorambat Prime Lamb Group

SEPTEMBER 2005 / PIRD OUTCOMES

Participants recognised the need to monitor live weights as well as pasture quality and quantity. Several group members have continued to tag lambs and regularly monitor growth rates.

Some individual lambs with similar weaning weights and trial conditions had quite different final weights, which may be attributed to genetic factors.

The ability of ewes to regain condition, and their subsequent ability to join, was not closely monitored, but the ewes of early weaned lambs appeared to regain condition more quickly. Management of early weaned ewes was seen as an advantage to producers.

Producers weaning by weight showed significant weight gains for early weaned lambs. These producers were lambing in autumn.

## Discussion

Difficulties associated with conducting the trials included determining trial mob sizes and lamb weights, finding extra time to weigh lambs and record results, prepare and allocate extra paddocks to trial mobs, increased pasture requirements for separate mobs requiring similar feed conditions, and managing fencing requirements.

There was a lack of consistency between the trial procedures employed by group members, which made it difficult to collate information.

All group members have gained an understanding of how different weaning practices affect their own production requirements. As a result of the trial, several producers are now weaning earlier than previously. Others have decided to monitor feed and management requirements annually before determining whether to wean lambs earlier. Group members are now more familiar with the practices of other members, and more comfortable discussing issues on their own properties.

Many group members participated in the three day bus tour of the south west region, and had the opportunity to learn and ask questions at PCI Hamilton and the Colac abattoir. The interaction with other prime lamb producer groups, and being able to ask questions of participants, was invaluable.

A detailed booklet, produced by tour participants, was produced and is available for all group members to read. Notes from guest speaker presentations were circulated to all members via newsletters.