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MANAGING LIVESTOCK IN A LATE BREAK

The season break in Western Australia is generally around May 15th. Although most of the State has had some rain in the last week, with little further rain on the horizon, it is time to start planning your sheep management strategies.

When looking at stocking potential for the year, one of the main components is the length of the season. For most, it is unusual to have an extended finish to the season, so ideally we would have an early break to optimise stocking rate. Timing of the seasonal break therefore defines stocking potential and carrying capacity for the year. So with this in mind, everyone looks to

the skies. Thankfully, there has been some rain, and not too far after the traditional break date. But looking at the short to medium term forecasts for the State, there is not much on the horizon, so you need to plan just in case. The short term forecasts are much more reliable than the 30 day predictions. If it says there is no rain, there will be no rain. As depressing as this might be, you can use this tool to plan ahead, and adjust stocking rates or grazing pressure if necessary.

Ideally, a plan is put together earlier than this, when there is no pressure and you can think clearly and rationally about the decisions in-

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volved. By creating this plan now and utilising the two week forecasts, you can better manage your sheep during a late break and potentially poor season.

This plan, called an “Exit Strategy”, was established by The Sheep’s Back in the first program it ran. It is a clear plan of how to manage stocking rates and carrying capacity, within the constraints of the season. If you can put this plan in place, your sheep, your business and you will be in better shape.

The strategy is about planning your stocking rate, and what to do if it rains on the 15th of May, 26th May, 30th May or 7th June, etc. You then decide what you will do at certain points based on this date. As these dates come up, you’re under less pressure as the plan is in place, whether it is to reduce feed demands by selling dry ewes, or methods that help increase the carrying capacity like bulking up pastures with oats, buying more feed or deferring pastures. You can put in the details - working out your stocking potential, planned stocking rate and what options you have, to determine an action plan that suits you.

The tables below can help you determine nutritional needs of your sheep at different stages, another important thing to manage coming into lambing. The amount of feed a ewe needs can change drastically during pregnancy and lactation, so ensure they are getting enough feed.

Table 1. Energy and protein expected from a kilo of different feed sources

	Metabolisable Energy (MJ/kgDM)	Protein (% content)
Pasture		
Early growth	10 – 12	20 – 32
Fodder		
Hay	8.0 – 10.20	4.0 – 12.5
Oats	8 – 11.5	5.5 – 13
Lupins	13 – 14	27 – 35
Barley	11.5 – 12	7 – 13
Wheat	12 - 13	7 – 13

Table 1 shows the energy provided by a kilogram of different feeds. For example, 1 kilogram of oats provides 8-11.5 MJ.

You can match the energy provided by your feed to the requirements of ewes in Table 2. For example, the 50kg single bearing ewe, 4 weeks from lambing. Let’s say you are feeding her

600g/day of oats. This equals about 6MJ. The table says she needs 10.6MJ a day at 4 weeks from lambing. She will usually be getting 4-5 ME from the dry stubble or pasture, so this makes a total of 10-11MJ a day with the oats. This tells you that you’re in the ball park with the sheep’s requirements.



Table 2: Energy Requirement in MJ/HD/Day for Ewe Maintenance at various stages of pregnancy and lambing

Weight (kg)	Single / Twin	Weeks Before Lambing			Post Lamb
		6	4	2	
50	S	10	10.6	12	18.7
	T	11.2	12.1	14	23.4
60	S	12	12.7	14.4	22.4
	T	13.4	14.5	16.8	28.1

CONDITION SCORING - Why it's vital at this time of year

The above nutritional information is great and will put you in the right zone for a sheep's requirements. However it is a moving target, in that sheep can selectively graze 30% better than we estimate. There is also a great deal of variation in what's available for them to eat at this time of year, especially when taking clover burr into consideration.

The best available option is to get your hands on them as often as possible, every two weeks ideally, and adjust the ration as per changes. The other option if this is not going to happen, is to overfeed by around 10%. **Don't be cheap, feed your sheep!**

LATE BREAK STRATEGIES

MOST IMPORTANTLY: TAKE ACTION

- Have a plan in place for the next 2 - 3 months. Examples are below, but plan this NOW.
- Adjust the plan according to the season and continue to evaluate.



Some of these strategies can be used on your property to make it through a late break and poor season, by reducing grazing pressure and stocking rate.

1. **Feed according to needs** - Draft mobs according to their condition and nutritional requirements, and preg test if you can for twins and singles. Keep an eye on the pastures once they start to grow so you can reduce supplementary feeding as necessary. The tables above can help tailor your feeding regime so you aren't under or over feeding. Remember to spread it out when feeding large amounts of cereals to avoid acidosis, and watch the tail end of your mobs, they can go downhill quickly.
 - Early lambing crossbred, older ewes and twinning ewes are your most at-risk animals. Reduce the stocking rates, put them on the best paddocks and make sure they are getting enough feed.
 - Single bearing ewes and later lambers, especially young, will need additional feed, but are at less risk than the group above.
 - Dry sheep are very robust animals. If you don't have to sell them, feed in line with the tables above.

2. **Sell sheep** - Dry ewes, wethers and hoggets should be the first to go. Prices are high at the moment so take heart in that!
3. **Buy feed now!** - Everyone will be chasing lupins, as there are a lot of leftover oats on farms. Prices will rise and feed may be hard to find. Oat prices will probably still be low. Calculate the cheapest feed per ME.
4. **Seek Agistment** - Agistment in the south is a little scarce, but there is still some there. It may seem expensive and time consuming, but allows you to keep your flock, decrease stocking rates at home and reduce hand feeding costs. Send sheep you can sell straight from the agistment property to decrease freight and biosecurity costs.
5. **Look at your seeding plans** - You could free up some paddocks for pasture, or plant a crop to graze.
 - If canola isn't sown until June, yield expectations are low. Although this is a few weeks away, if you have un-spray topped pastures intended to go to canola, you could keep it for the stock.
 - Sow a paddock of cereals for feed in the winter/early July period. This may provide quick feed to fill the feed gap and also double as extra fodder to finish and grow the lambs later in the year.
6. **Grow more feed** - Scratch in oats or barley and apply nitrogen to grow more bulk. Apply nitrogen to grassy pastures or cereal stubbles that contain regrowth.
7. **Remember RLEM** - Late breaks usually see active mites when the clover is emerging. Spraying as pastures emerge or even a bare earth treatment could be valuable as RLEM can eat the equivalent of 2DSE.
8. **Use hay/straw** - Hay and straw is a cheap, substitute feed to pair with lupins. Keeping costs down means you could feed for longer and let the pastures really take off and reach optimal feed on offer.
9. **Watch for worms** - Shorter pastures lead to the likelihood of heavier worm burdens and worm build up. Pre-lambing drenches (if possible) will help as sheep in poorer condition are more susceptible to worms.

EXAMPLE STRATEGY

The example exit strategy shows the change in carrying capacity or stocking rate (SR) in response to the season. The strategy compares the potential stocking rate, or carrying capacity, of the property to the current stocking rate to determine when action needs to be taken.

In this plan, reduced carrying capacity either results in the farmer decreasing grazing pressure by feeding more, or decreasing the stocking rate by selling stock. Note these decisions carry on into actions such as "buy 50t lupins" or "increase feed by 60g/h".

The planned stocking for this example strategy was 10.5 for the season. As the 14th of May

was reached, the planned stocking rate was higher than the potential, so actions need to begin to decrease stocking rates of grazing pressure.

Date	Potential Stocking Rate	Planned Stocking Rate	Tactic	Action
14 th May	10	10.5	Reduce stocking rate	Sell half of dry ewes
21 st May	9	9	Reduce grazing pressure Reduce stocking rate	Increase feed by 60g/h/day (Buy 50t more lupins) Sell remaining dry ewes
28 th May	8	8	Reduce grazing pressure and farm SR	Agistment for wethers
4 th June	7	7	Reduce grazing pressure	Review cropping program- grazing crops? Purchase hay and add to diet
11 th June	7	7	Reduce grazing pressure and increase pasture growth	Nitrogen application to grassy pastures
18 th June	6.5	6.5	Reduce grazing pressure	Feedlot weaners

Your Strategy

Date	Potential Stocking Rate	Planned Stocking Rate	Tactic	Action
1st May				
7th May				
14 th May				
21 st May				
28 th May				
4 th June				
11 th June				
18 th June				

Sheep and wool continue to be at record prices so take care of your assets, and continue to plan, assess, and plan again.

The Sheep's Back is here to help. More information and exit strategy tools can be found at The Sheep's Back website, on Facebook or Twitter or please don't hesitate to email us on admin@sheepsback.com.au.

RE-INTRODUCING SHEEP INTO THE WHEATBELT

The broadacre agricultural region of Western Australia can be categorised as either sheepbelt or wheatbelt. Typically, enterprises in the sheepbelt have a substantially higher proportion of sheep compared to wheatbelt farming systems.

There is anecdotal evidence that, for the wheatbelt, if one crops more than 70%, profits tend to decline and risk increases. The reason being lower margin crops are planted on areas of the farm that otherwise wouldn't be cropped. This is a generalisation and naturally there are exceptions to this rule.

There has been a recent trend of wheatbelt farmers considering adding sheep to their farming enterprise. Taking the plunge into sheep is not easily done. Prices are at record levels meaning significant capital is required to fund your way into a sheep enterprise. If capital is not an issue, purchasing sheep at record highs is not without significant risk as it could possibly lead to a large capital loss should prices decline in the future.

Could a model of cooperation between sheep farmers (sheepbelt) and wheat farmers (wheatbelt) be generated to satisfy both parties? We have outlined a simple method of cooperation that requires a sheepbelt farmer running sheep on the wheatbelt farm's stubble.

Post Harvest

The assumption that has been made is the wheatbelt farm has stubbles, in particular cereal stubbles, which are not being utilised by the sheep. The other advantages, apart from financial, for the wheatbelt farm in having sheep graze on the stubbles are:

- Reduce summer weed numbers,
- Ability to spray graze weeds meaning lower chemical spend,

- Knocking down chaff piles so they can be seeded through,
- Grazing chaff lines so they break down more quickly, and
- Recycling nutrients to benefit the following crop.

There is the concern that sheep cause soil compaction and thus reduce subsequent yields. It is correct that sheep cause compaction while grazing on stubbles, but it is shallow and transient and usually disappears after the soil wets again. Reduced water infiltration and yield from grazing is due to removal of cover rather than compaction, light grazing has no impact on subsequent grain yields. This was research carried out by WANTFA and Grain & Graze 2.

The benefits to the sheepbelt farmers and their sheep are:

- Lower feeding costs (less hand feeding required)
- Growing into bigger sheep in the wheatbelt
 - o Increased conception rates in ewes
 - o Increased sale price for wethers

Example

Agist ewe lambs from the sheepbelt to the wheatbelt for the summer returning them at the break of the season, a period of 20 weeks. The cost of feeding ewe lambs over summer is calculated in Table 1 and includes no access to a fodder crop.

Table 1: Cost of feeding ewe lambs for 20 weeks

20 kg oats @ \$240/t	\$4.80
20 kg lupins @ \$360/t	\$7.20
Hand feeding cost	\$12.00

The average feeding cost of a July/August drop ewe lamb with access to only pasture and stubbles (no fodder crop) is about \$12/hd. How does this compare to agistment on wheatbelt stubbles? Table 2 includes the costs of freighting the ewe lambs both ways and 20 weeks of agistment.

Table 2: Cost of agisting ewe lambs for 20 weeks

Freight both ways	\$5.00
Agist 40 c/hd/wk (20 weeks)	\$8.00
Total Cost	\$13.00

Husbandry costs associated with running the ewe lambs is assumed to be the same no matter where they are situated. However, in dryer areas there tends to be less worm and fly pressure. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate it will cost \$1/hd extra for sheepbelt farms to agist lambs in the wheatbelt rather than run them on the home property.

Why would a sheepbelt farmer bother, if for every ewe lamb they agist it costs them \$1? There are several reasons, some easy to value but many are not:

- Not having to manage and feed ewe lambs over summer
- Ewe lambs grow out quicker in the wheatbelt meaning:
 - o Lower death rates
 - o Increased conception rates as maidens and subsequent lambings
 - o Increased wool cut at first shearing
- Sheepbelt property will run a lower summer stocking rate, advantages include:
 - o More stubble area for remaining sheep
 - o Less hand feeding required for remaining sheep
 - o More soil cover in subsequent year

A typical number of ewe lambs from a sheepbelt property would be 1 500 head. Agisting these sheep into the wheatbelt would cost \$1 500 per year but it comes with all the added benefits listed above. For the wheatbelt farmer they get paid \$12 000 in agistment fees for managing 1 500 ewe lambs on their property.

Water infrastructure would be the biggest hurdle to overcome; checking and maintaining scheme and bore water is incredibly time consuming. This can be made easier with remote

monitoring, but that is an added cost. Dam water is ideal but many wheatbelt properties do not have adequate dams.

The above is just one simple example that show mutual benefit to both the sheepbelt farmer and wheatbelt farmer. Any number of mutually beneficial agreements could be drawn up, some other examples include:

- Wethers - either transported both ways or sold from wheatbelt property
- Keeping sheep agisted on stubbles into winter on:
 - o Dirty paddocks
 - o Lower quality soil (lower crop margin)
 - o Frost prone areas
 - o In the event of a late break, some paddocks are removed from crop
 - o Growing a legume pasture to sequester N for the next crop
- A wheatbelt farmer wishing to acquire sheep without the large capital cost, could 'swap' sheep for the agistment fee (no commission or freight).

Conclusion

This could be an area of mutual benefit for both parties, with not only the profit that can be made, but many other advantages to both parties. There are current examples of these types of arrangements, and it is clear that the modern merino from the sheepbelt thrives when introduced to the wheatbelt. Freight in the past has been the biggest barrier to these types of arrangements. Usually they have started during dry times when sheepbelt farmers are trying to lower stocking rates without selling low value sheep. However, current sheep margins are very high so the added benefits such as increased lambing rates or increased wool cuts can now be traded off against the freight cost. We urge you to at least investigate this type of arrangement for mutual benefit.

Preparing For Any Season

Farmers are good at taking advantage of a good season, or even an average one. However, bad seasons are part of the farming cycle, with late or false breaks and poor spring pastures. Late breaks present particular challenges to mixed enterprise farmers, especially those with optimised stocking rates. The later the break, the lower the carrying capacity as there will be less feed produced. Managing these poor seasons and break times is all about planning ahead.



Boyup Brook farmers Peter and Carolyn Reid are no strangers to planning for poor seasons. Each year, they revise their “exit strategy” - a plan to manage season breaks, and a poor year if it occurs. Peter says “the best part of the plan is how it helps you recognise a poor season before it

really hits”, allowing them to minimise the impact of a bad year on the farm by acting fast. “If you run a high stocking rate, you have to have a plan to manage it when a poor season occurs”.

Exit strategies, or ‘Back Door Options’, were brought to the limelight by The Sheep’s Back, being part of the first program run. It involves planning the season in advance, when there is no pressure or emotions involved in the decision making. By predicting carrying capacity if there is no rain, realistic stocking rates can be determined, with actions to decrease stocking rate or grazing pressure, such as selling dry ewes, buying hay or seeking agistment. Peter thinks of it as a staggered management plan that ‘takes the unknown out of a bad season’. “Once you know what you are going to do, it takes out the panic - it’s not so frightening when you have a plan on paper to refer to.”

The strategies are designed to decrease farmer stress and help manage sheep nutrition and grazing pressure. When it rains, and how much, is out of our hands, but other actions can be taken to reduce the pressure you feel. By taking the

stress away and planning early, decisions can be made that are cost-effective, benefiting the business, sheep and people involved during the season.

In response to the forecast late break this year, the Reid’s plan was to stock up on lupins and sell some of their dry ewes. “We always pregnancy test, not just to feed twins and singles better, but so we know what we have to sell. Selling the dry ewes is always our first step.” With sheep prices at near record highs, the family doesn’t find this step too hard, and with the lupins: “Buying feed early is never a loss - prices are lower and as long as you can store it, feed can always be used next year.”

The Reid’s exit strategy options are designed to ‘take it two weeks at a time’, based on changes in the farm’s carrying capacity and the two week rain forecast. The first action, preparing to sell dry ewes and purchasing lupins, begins two weeks before the traditional season break date of May 15th. Peter says it’s all about being proactive, keeping options open by taking action as soon as you see there could be a late break. The plan is adapted as the season progresses, in response to the break time. The Reid’s’ planned actions include seeking agistment and selling more dry ewes and wethers, to decrease the stocking rate at home and allow the pastures to grow when they do emerge. They will also give the pastures a nitrogen boost to increase its growth rate. In the past, the Reids have also reviewed their cropping program, such as in 2006 when pasture paddocks going into crop were left out of crop to provide more feed.

The main value of the plan to Carolyn is that it forces them to think about their best options, and how to put them together. This leads to ideas like grazing creek lines, of which the Reids have several, to allow them to defer pastures. To Peter, it means he knows they have done everything they can to prepare for the season, so he “isn’t sitting there going to pieces, hoping for rain”. While they still stress and pray for rain like all farmers, the Reids are a little less scared of the unknown season ahead, knowing they have a plan. “The hard part now is just sticking to it” Peter adds.