



Avoiding Sheep Lice

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Introduction

The aim of every sheep owner should be to run a lice-free flock without the need for any lice treatment. A good understanding of sheep lice will help you run sheep without suffering unnecessary lice treatment costs and production losses. You will also benefit by reducing human exposure to pesticides, and by producing wool with little or no pesticide residue.

Obviously if lice are already present, they must be eradicated. Every effort should then be made to keep lice out, and to avoid introducing them with purchased sheep. If lice do infest your sheep, then you should identify where they came from, to prevent reinfestation.

Performing the following tasks will aid in the prevention of lice infestation (and many other diseases).

- Try to make your boundary fencing and gateways as sheep-proof as possible.
- Do not tolerate stray sheep or goats, and never put stray sheep or goats over someone else's fence.
- Work with your neighbours to combat sheep lice by improving fences, not tolerating strays, discussing lice problems and where appropriate co-ordinating eradication programs
- Inspect sheep (including rams) thoroughly before purchase, then isolate and consider treatment of these sheep after the first shearing.

Human spread of sheep lice has received some publicity. While this is considered lower risk than spread by stray or purchased sheep, people who handle sheep should ensure they do not carry lice from one property to another on their clothing or footwear.

Legislation

Sheep lice is a notifiable disease under the Livestock Disease Control Act 1994, requiring owners to notify an Inspector of Livestock if they suspect or know their sheep have lice. It also means owners who send lice-infested sheep to a saleyard may be prosecuted.

Lice-infested sheep in a saleyard will be:

- Returned to the owner's property; or
- Sold direct for slaughter; or,

- As a last resort only, sold to a responsible person, who will isolate then treat the sheep to eradicate the lice.

Summary

Running a lice free flock is achievable by undertaking a few fairly simple precautions when introducing sheep, and by making sure fences are adequate to keep your sheep in and strays out. Remember prevention is better than cure. You will save time and money by not having to undertake expensive, labour intensive control and eradication programs.

In all situations lice should be the enemy, not the sheep-owner, and by working together we can dramatically reduce lice treatment costs and production losses.



Figure 1. Lice infected sheep.

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