Agriculture Notes

Organic Farming: Prime Lamb Production

March 2006
AG1237
ISSN 1329-8062

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This agnote provides information on the organic lamb industry, including an overview of production, marketing according to organic standards and key contacts for further information.

Introduction

Australia is a leading producer of lamb, with the Australian lamb meat industry worth over $1billion in 2004-5. Victoria produces 38.4% of Australia's lamb production (MLA 2005).

Victoria has approximately 350 certified organic primary producers. This number is expected to increase by 20 to 30% in the next three years (Halpin 2004). Only 8% of Victorian organic producers specialise in sheep and goat with another 11% of farms producing multiple commodities including lamb.

The organic lamb market is growing at 30% per annum and growth is expected to continue with 52% of current organic lamb producers looking to increase production in the next three years (Halpin 2004). In 2003, Victoria produced 93 tonnes of sheep and goats (liveweight basis) for the organic market, worth $670,000. Another 180 tonnes was sold on the conventional market due to the volatility of supply and demand, and distance to certified organic processors (Halpin 2004).

What is organic lamb?

Organic lamb refers to a young sheep normally sold from 6 to 12 months of age that are gestated, born and raised on an organically certified property.

What is the purpose of organic certification?

The purpose of organic certification is to provide consumer assurance that the purchased product is organic and to protect genuine organic producers from fraudulent claims.

Organic certification agencies develop and maintain standards in accordance with the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce. Producers are inspected against these standards by independent third parties to ensure compliance. While different certifiers have their own standards they all have three levels of organic certification:

i. Pre-certification

A 12 month inspection period, prior to in-conversion, which commences after a formal application to the certifying agency. During this time, an inspection of the farming system is made, and soil and/or tissue sampling for residual chemical use is carried out. Producers also document management strategies that detail how they will comply with the requirements of the Standard. This forms the basis of the Organic Management Plan as producers learn to change farming practices to organic management.

ii. In-conversion

A transitional level where the producer consolidates the organic farming system on the property. Properties at this level must meet the minimum requirement of the organic standard usually for a period of 2 years before they can gain full organic certification.

iii. Certified organic

The highest level of certification.

Current Organic Industry Practice

i. Soil fertility and management

Any organic livestock production system begins with soil management. Soil fertility, soil structure and biological activity are fundamental within organic farming systems. The aim is that plants are supported by a viable soil ecosystem with an observable and sustainable food web with minimal reliance upon external inputs. Nutrients are suppled to the plant via the soil rather than directly to the plant. Nutrients should be maintained through practical methods of recycling organic material and biological activity. Mineral fertilisers can be used to supply an identified soil deficiency.

Organic management of soil fertility requires a combination of practices. These may include the rotation of crops, the use of animals to recycle plants, green manure crops, minimal cultivation, compost and/or mineral fertilisers.

ii. Livestock purchase

Livestock should be sourced from certified organic farms. Animals sourced from non-organic farms cannot gain organic certification for any carcass products and cannot be resold as organic. However, their products may be

Victoria
The Place To Be

converted to organic with the minimum time frames as set out in Table 1. Regardless of the certification status of animals on the organic farm, no more than 10% of a herd may be replaced annually from conventional sources.

Table 1. Withholding Periods for Livestock Products.

Products	Minimum Conversion Period
Wool	18 months
Milk	180 days
Ruminants and Monogastrics (meat)	From last trimester of pregnancy

(National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce; 2005)

iii. Farming systems

Organic lamb is currently produced from four different farming enterprises

- *Wool* – running primarily a pure merino flock, with cull lambs sold for meat
- *Meat* – specialised prime lamb production and/or producing breeding stock with excess stock sold for meat
- *Both wool and meat* – breeding first cross ewes from a merino flock or running dual purpose sheep
- *Domestic grazing* – where sheep are used as a grazing tool for other enterprises situated on a property (*eg.* Orchards) and might sell lambs, however this is not considered the main enterprise.

iv. Breeds and production strategies

There is a wide range of sheep breeds currently used for lamb production. The majority of lambs being sold domestically are second cross ([Merino x Border Leister] x Dorset or White Suffolk) and Dorper crosses, with some merinos, but these generally achieve lower prices.

The production strategies used included

- Annual joining - September and April
- Biannual joining - spring and autumn lambing
- Continuous joining
- Joining every 8 months
- Split joining - joining different mobs at 2 monthly intervals

Joining annually limits the flexibility of supply to two or three months per year.

v. Grazing management

Grazing management is critical for both animal, plant and soil health. The production of organic lamb requires close attention to best practice rotational grazing management. This includes:

1. Grazing to allow adequate rest periods for pasture regrowth;
2. Grazing so that lambs have regular access to clean pasture to manage internal parasites; this reduces the chance of lambs picking up worms from infected pastures;
3. Diverse, perennial plant pastures to provide adequate nutrition, flexibility in the finishing system and better environmental management.

Perennial pasture for a lamb production system may include species such as lucerne, chicory, phalaris, fescue and plantain as well as the more traditional ryegrass and clover species.

vi. Livestock health

Livestock treatment is based on preventative management. This may include the use of strategies such grazing management and breeding for resistance. The most problematic animal health problems are internal parasites, lice and flystrike. The use of treatments not in accordance with the standards, due to veterinary advice, results in extended withholding periods or loss of certification status (Table 2).

Table 2. Withholding periods and conditions for re-certification of products after treatments.

Products	Conditions
Wool	18 months
Milk	180 days
Ruminants and Monogastrics (meat)	Permanent loss

(National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce; 2005)

vii. Marketing

Lambs are typically sold by carcass weight (18-22 kg), visual condition/fat scores (2-3) and age (approximately 6 months). Most lambs are sold directly to processors (63%), with some being sold through an agent (26%) and 8% sold privately (Figure 1).

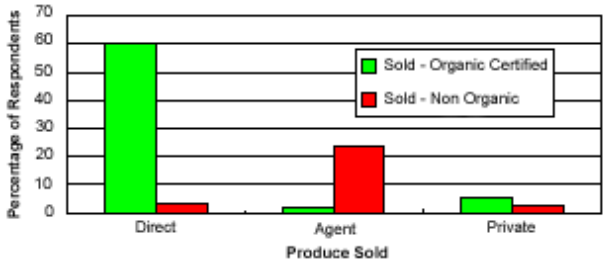

Figure 1. The number of lambs sold through each market as indicated by respondents from a survey of New South Wales, South Australian and Victorian organic sheep producers, carried out in 2004.

The organic lamb market has traditionally traded exclusively with one chain partner, either direct to the consumers or processor, with most supply chain relationships informal. The supply of organic meat fluctuates across seasons and from year to year and the perishability of meat products poses a particular problem in matching supply with demand. There is a need for horizontal and vertical collaboration within the supply chain. Organic lamb producers should consider working together with a processor to provide a consistent supply throughout the year.

Key Industry Contacts

Organic Red Meat Marketing Group/Gippsland Organic Livestock

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Rural Organics (Organic Lamb Exporting)

Janie McClure

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Further Information

DPI Organic Newsletter

refer to website: www.dpi.vic.gov.au >agriculture food>factsheets>general farming>organic farming

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