Worm control lessons at Quilpie

- Under the right conditions, worms can emerge as a serious problem even in semi-arid regions.
- Testing for worm egg count, drenching of all animals based on the results and regular rotation of mobs quickly brought the problem under control.
- In future wet seasons, worm testing and control will be proactive to prevent losses.

Background

A very wet season in 2010-11 proved to Brian and Kylie Rutledge that worms can cause losses even in semi-arid regions of Queensland.

2012 was the first time that sheep were treated for worms on 'Moble', near Quilpie, in the 100 years that the Rutledge family has been grazing the property.

The period between 2010 and the start of 2012 featured very dry seasons followed by wet weather and prolific pasture growth, providing the perfect conditions for worm load build up.

Mr Rutledge suspected a problem when he observed that stock, both sheep and cattle, were not performing, despite the great season. A worm egg count test confirmed populations were high.

Brian and Kylie Rutledge

At the time of the worm control program, Brian and Kylie Rutledge ran 10,000 merino sheep as well as cattle and goats on 'Moble'. The sheep numbers have fallen to around 4000 in 2014 due to a number of poor seasons and dog problems.

Research

A Leading Sheep webinar jolted the Rutledges into action when they realised that worms could be causing stock to be underperforming in such a good season.

Mr Rutledge learned from the webinar that even in regions where worms are only a problem once in every 10 years, under the right conditions they can build to large numbers very quickly.

"My daughter Felicity is a vet who also encouraged testing for worm egg count. Samples were taken and sent to a lab in Brisbane for analysis which confirmed that the worm egg count on the property was high, Mr Rutledge said.

"Sheep were treated at shearing within three or four weeks of diagnosing the problem.

"To my knowledge, my neighbours did not undertake the same control programs as the worm problems were not as evident on their places. I think for us that moving sheep closer to home and in smaller paddocks to help avoid dog attacks may have played a role in exacerbating the worm problem", he said.

'Moble' in flood

Costs involved

The costs of the worm control program included mustering, the worm egg count testing and the resulting treatment of every sheep on the property.

Worm egg count testing preceded the drenching program to confirm that worms were present and at levels to justify drenching.

Every sheep on the property was treated with a dual worm and lice backliner product at approximately $1/head.

Post drenching, mobs were shifted a couple of times into clean paddocks to break the worm cycle.

"Worm treatment coincided with shearing which saved the costs of extra labour for an additional muster. In future, spring lamb marking will provide an opportunity to assess stock and test for worms, particularly if seasonal conditions indicate that there could be a problem emerging, Mr Rutledge said.

Was it good for business?

Mr Rutledge estimates that there were serious financial losses to the business by not identifying and treating the worm problem earlier. He would have acted faster if he had known what the impact of a wet season could be on worm loads, even in semi-arid country with an average 300mm but very erratic rainfall.

- Losses from not acting are calculated at approximately half a kilo of wool per animal or around $30,000 to the business.
- Acting six months earlier may have meant significantly fewer losses in kilograms of both meat and wool.
- After the testing and drenching program, he observed that sheep quickly gained weight and condition.
- Stock condition improved despite moving into colder weather with frosted feed.

Follow up worm testing showed a zero worm count so it was clear that the program was successful.

The worm control program has led to better utilisation of available feed and cleaner pastures.

Conclusion

The decision to use a worm egg count test to confirm suspicions of a worm problem limited financial losses, as well as potentially saving future losses. The only change Mr Rutledge would have made to the program was to start treatment earlier in the season.

Stock are now checked with worm load considerations in mind and the Rutledges are more aware of weather conditions and how they may relate to worm loads.

“There have been a number of dry years on ‘Moble’ since the drenching program happened, which has kept worm numbers naturally low.

“However, when wet conditions return, I plan to test dung samples regularly and keep on top of worm populations before they reach damaging levels again,” he said.