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SEASONAL CHALLENGES FOR SHEEP HEALTH AND WELFARE

Gareth Bath, Chair LWCC

Every season and livestock farming activity brings opportunities, but also threats. Some of these are quite predictable and thus farmers can take the right precautions and make preparations to minimise their effects, but other events are not foreseeable with any degree of certainty. Even with these, there should be a plan of action to be implemented when, sooner or later, it is needed. Examples of such events are droughts, excessive rainfall and wildfires.

The aim is of course firstly to minimise losses and optimise both production and profitability, but the second consideration of the welfare of livestock is also important. Good livestock production depends on satisfactory care for the animals, and ensuring a good standard of animal welfare also promotes optimal profits. There is in addition the important influence of consumer expectations: increasingly, consumers are demanding that all animals be well-treated throughout their lives.

There are three keys to dealing successfully with seasonal events that threaten livestock health and welfare and therefore farming success:

1. Identify the risk times when unfavourable events are likely (When may they occur?)
2. Identify all the risk factors associated (What can happen?)
3. Draw up a plan of action and be ready to implement it in time, or as the need arises (What must be done?)

This precautionary programme is best drawn up in consultation with appropriate experts including pasture scientists, animal scientists and veterinarians. In a short article like this it will be impossible to cover all the risks that sheep farmers may face in different situations, but what follows can serve as an outline for the identification of risks and action plans.

Annual predictable events:

The great majority of farmers have a yearly programme of activities for the livestock cycle that starts with preparations for breeding and ends with the selection of replacement ewes – and this forms the basis for everything else. It becomes more complicated with two lambing seasons, and especially with 8-month systems. This is where expert assistance is especially needed.

The breeding season must be presaged by a check for ram suitability for mating ('fertility tests'), as well as checking the ewes for age, mastitis and readiness to mate, plus the condition scores that should be rising above 2 ½. Before lambing the ewes should reach body condition scores of 3 ½ or more.

Vaccines for the ewes should be concluded some weeks before mating but those for rams may better be done after the mating season. Check feet for lameness. The ewes should have been scanned for pregnancy and should be fed accordingly.

Lactating ewes and their lambs need a special programme of care to ensure their best health, welfare and production. Underlying all this planning is the necessity of a comprehensive fodder flow programme, whether extensive, intensive or mixed.

Less predictable risk events:

Because these events are uncertain and may not happen every year (or may happen with variable severity), planning is more difficult. Nevertheless, contingency plans should be made that can be implemented when required; otherwise the effects can be very serious. Examples are severe droughts, flood and fires. Gradual changes like climate change have to be considered and provided for, but the urgency is not as great.

- Severe cold snaps, especially in spring: there should be sufficient shelter provided for animals when severe weather strikes. Newly shorn sheep and lambs are particularly at risk and losses can be high if no precautions are taken.
- Heat waves: the thermo-neutral zone (where animals feel most comfortable) is much lower for sheep than for humans – they do not sweat and can lose heat only by panting. The greatest difficulty is when the weather is also very humid. Provision of shade is essential for these periods.
- Droughts: recent events have made clear the necessity for planning. Droughts are certain – only their timing, severity and duration are unpredictable. Fodder reserves and timely culling are crucial. It is not acceptable ever to let animals starve to death.
- High rainfall seasons: these bring plenty of feed but are also favourable for severe outbreaks of insect-borne diseases like Rift Valley Fever and Bluetongue.
- Poisonous plants: their impact depends heavily on the prevailing climatic conditions and pasture management. A good example is 'geeldikkop'. There are dozens of potentially dangerous plants, but those that pose a risk on each farm are best identified with the local veterinarian so that appropriate plans can be made.
- Pasture fertilisation and wilting: fertilisation is essential but if managed inappropriately can result in poisoning, especially by nitrate and prussic acid. Hungry animals, too much fertilizer, no rain, too short a period between applying the fertiliser and grazing, and wilting - these factors can all convert nutritious pastures into toxic dangers.
- Diseases: footrot, foot abscesses and other diseases are worse in wet seasons and will need more attention.
- Parasites: ticks depend on the right conditions to flourish, and this means that control measures are necessary. The same is true of internal parasites (worms) that will need more vigorous management when the weather is favourable for worms.

- Fires: good rainfall seasons build up combustible material and in the dry season there may be a high fire risk. Good fire breaks and district teamwork and firefighting are the best first line of defence. Animals caught in fires must be assessed and classified into those needing little or no treatment, those that may survive with treatment and those so severely affected that it is best to end their lives humanely.

By working as a team, farmers and their advisers can identify these seasonal risks and make effective plans to minimise the impact on their animals.

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For more information, see the LWCC website www.lwcc.org.za or contact Sandra Wilkinson secretary@lwcc.org.za