



➔ by Prof. Gareth Bath



# Livestock welfare **benefits** farmers + too



Some farmers may think that livestock welfare is a tiresome extra item that has to be added to a long list of other, more important tasks on the farm. But that is not the case. It bears repetition that livestock welfare and animal production go hand in hand, and both contribute to farm profits. It is only at the extremes of animal production that sheep welfare could be compromised and, fortunately, in South Africa the great majority of sheep farmers understand, accept and implement the concept of a balanced animal for achieving sustained and acceptable productivity.

**B**y avoiding extremes, we have or can breed sheep suited to the environment that can enjoy a contented life on the farm. For over four decades I've seen that the great majority of sheep farmers do care for their sheep and most take pride in how they look and perform. Only a minority unfairly warp the image of livestock farmers. We have to do whatever we can to get them to protect the welfare of their animals too.

Consumer perceptions are paramount, so we must ensure that sheep farming and the products of wool and meat are seen to be environmentally friendly, ethically acceptable and wholesome for the consumers.

### Checking that we comply

An excellent starting point for wool farmers is the *NWGA Code of Best Practice*. Read it, know it and implement it – since it represents guidelines drawn up by the wool industry itself, independently assessed for animal welfare implications by the Livestock Welfare Coordinating Committee (LWCC) and therefore represents consensus that would carry weight in any investigation.

It outlines which farm procedures (such as castration) may be carried out, as well as when and how. Alternative methods may be described, but each one carries certain risks if the procedure is not carried out correctly, and so these risks must be known and avoided. If farmers comply with all the recommendations in this code they are probably compliant with most animal welfare requirements too.

### What more can be done?

It will pay to have the livestock farming system that is used evaluated by an outside independent and knowledgeable person such as the local veterinarian. Farmers can then see where improvements can be made.

Let's again take castration as an example.

The testes produce nature's own growth hormone (testosterone) that also keeps carcasses lean – so why remove them if the ram lambs are to be sold or grazed separately before they are sexually mature at four or five months? Every time we lower avoidable risk, we improve animal welfare.

We have to be welfare aware, and welfare active to fulfil the duty of care that is incumbent on all animal owners. Having recently experienced a widespread and severe drought, all of us should ensure that there is an effective plan to minimise its effects next time drought strikes. No animal should ever be allowed to die of starvation – it is both morally unacceptable and financially suicidal.

Farmers in a given district who fail to give livestock adequate care should be approached by the local association so that they can improve matters for their own benefit, as well as the farming community. The few should not be allowed to sully the name of the compliant majority – if persuasion and assistance fails, the NSPCA can be contacted to investigate, since they have the power to do so and recommend remedial action. Only in the last resort may legal action be necessary.



### Current actions

The sheep industry has reason to be proud of many improvements that have come into effect over time. There is a standard for the transportation of livestock and a comprehensive system of managing animals at abattoirs, as well as a standard for livestock sales and auctions. Additionally, there is provision for animal welfare in the Animal Pounds Bill that is due for promulgation.

A good example of an industry initiative taken has been the phasing out of mulesing in wool sheep, to the extent that Cape Wools SA

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currently gets mules-free declarations from more than 99% of its wool suppliers. Two decades ago farmers accepted the advice of animal scientists to actively select against blowfly-prone animals. The result has been that virtually all farmers find mulesing unnecessary; this is to the benefit of the sheep that escape the risk and pain, as well as to farmers whose wool is seen by buyers as welfare-friendly.

### What about the future?

We in South Africa, through the LWCC, have committed ourselves to setting animal welfare standards at least as high as those required by the *OIE*, the international body for both animal health and welfare. This means that we must ensure that *OIE* standards are realistic and universally achievable, and not aimed only at advanced countries in the northern hemisphere.

A trend that everyone needs to note is that we are moving from input-based to output-based measurement of welfare issues. This means that success is measured by results



achieved, rather than solely on measures taken to promote welfare. Let's take a concrete example: with lameness, the measure of success will be mainly the numbers, duration and severity of lameness in a flock, rather than the actions taken to limit the extent and impact of lameness like footbaths, treatments or vaccines.

Personally, I believe that both indicators are important. Farmers can rest assured that their interests are addressed at the LWCC and elsewhere by representatives of organisations like the NWGA, the South African Mohair Growers' Association (Samga), the Red Meat Producers' Organisation (RPO), the Milk Producers' Organisation (MPO) and others to ensure that livestock welfare assists both animals and farmers. 🐾