



➔ by Prof. Gareth Bath

For any deal to be fair, it has to meet the reasonable requirements and expectations of all the parties involved. On livestock farms this mainly revolves around the farmer, the workers and the livestock but more broadly, includes society, especially consumers, and the environment. If this balance is skewed in favour of just one or two parties, then the deal cannot be deemed to be fair.

How can and should we balance the interests of the main parties – farmers, workers and livestock?

Support farmworkers

To do all the tasks required on a livestock farm, workers must be fully equipped in every respect. Starting with the handling facilities, the kraals, pens and races must be adequate and in good order to ensure that farm procedures can be performed efficiently.

Too many farms still struggle on with minimal or poor facilities. If workers have to work in the sun all day, having to bend over to examine, vaccinate or treat hundreds of sheep, poor work and bad outcomes that could injure animals or leave them improperly treated or vaccinated may be the result. The whole process slows down and is badly done – which will affect the farmer's pocket by driving up costs or reducing income.

The same goes for equipment – malfunctioning dosing guns, badly maintained automatic syringes, blunt shears, poor disinfection procedures, etc. will make it difficult or impossible to carry out the work properly and workers can become fatigued, irritated or careless when forced to use substandard equipment. The sheep suffer as a result and so does the farmer.

Above all, livestock should not be handled and routine procedures like ear tagging, tattooing and castrations carried out without thorough training and supervision.

Staff must know what is to be done, as well as how and when it is to be done, the risks involved and how to minimise them. Well-trained employees perform the required tasks efficiently, quickly and with minimal risk – the sheep benefit and the farmers reap the rewards of work well done. Another benefit for farmworkers is that their chances of injury while performing their tasks are kept to a minimum, resulting in farmers having happier and more productive staff. Farmers have a duty to keep their workers safe.

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Luckily there are not many livestock diseases that are a risk to humans, but some of them are very dangerous and hard or impossible to treat. Staff and farmers who get diseases like Rift Valley fever or bovine brucellosis face a life-threatening situation, and in today's litigious atmosphere farmers could be held liable for exposing staff to serious risk by not vaccinating their livestock.

Collective incentives

Apart from supplying staff with good handling facilities, equipment, training and protection from injuries and disease, many farmers have seen the value of introducing staff incentives for production goals met or exceeded. The goals have to be achievable and adequate compensation paid for this system to work. It benefits not only good, hard-working staff but also the sheep that are well cared for, as well as the farmers who get better efficiency, productivity and ultimately profits. Some farmers say that this system does not work for them, but why does it work for others? Best to go and find out what other farmers are doing to achieve success in this regard.

Targeted selective treatment (TST), such as Famacha, should be used so that only the sheep likely to benefit from treatment are dosed. At the same time other problems can be noticed and treated early. Sheep are better cared for and the farmer saves money. The TST system can also be used to treat sheep suffering from other diseases – using the five-point checking system.

If staff are trained to estimate body condition score (BCS) by feeling the lumbar spine on the back, the farmer can quickly establish if the feed the sheep are getting is adequate for the stage of production they are in. If not, the feed can be adjusted. The BCS technique is easy to learn and accuracy gets better with practice.

What about the sheep? They did not ask to be domesticated, but since they are, we have a duty of care towards them. By meeting

their basic needs, feeding them correctly and managing them with care we meet our part of the arrangement and give them a fair deal.

Making workers part of the team brings benefits because training, task allocation, performance evaluation and incentives for success will improve feelings of self-worth and make meaningful contributions to farming performance.

Society and consumers

Apart from the three major participants dealt with above, what about consumers and the environment? Consumers are increasingly expecting and demanding that livestock be well cared for throughout their lives. This applies to all products consumed, including wool, milk, meat and by-products. These products have a good perception profile with consumers, based on natural feeding and lifestyle. Intensified farming practices involving special feeds, confinement and crowding bring the risk that consumer perceptions can change, which is something to be avoided.

Caring for the environment

Farmers, the custodians of one of the world's greatest assets – its productive farmland – are increasingly expected to ensure that this asset is maintained or improved. In most parts of South Africa this has been achieved and the farming community deserves credit for having largely reversed the dire situation that threatened farmland half a century ago. Improvements have to be continued in anticipation of the pressures that are coming to livestock farming in the future.

By coming together, the livestock farming community can benefit everyone involved and make a major contribution to the country. 

