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Breaking the worm burden at Ben Lomond

Key Points

- Removing all stock from lambing paddocks during March/April reduces worm populations and pressure on ewes during spring lambing in the Northern Tablelands of NSW
- Worm tolerance thresholds are set according to pasture and stock conditions
- Drenches changed from long-acting to short-acting
- Number of drenches cut from 4-5/year to 2, delivering chemical and labour savings and reduced risk of resistance

Small changes to grazing management have resulted in a big reduction in the worm burden, as well as significant cost savings, for NSW sheep producer Nigel Bourne.

Worms cost Australian sheep producers more than any other animal health problem, and the timing and precision of the management practices used by producers can have major impact on their effectiveness and the risk of worm populations developing drench resistance.

By following the principles learned through WormBoss training, Mr Bourne has managed to halve the number of drench applications, resulting in chemical and labour savings and improved stock productivity.

“The biggest benefits we have achieved have come from the WormBoss advice to prepare our paddocks early for lambing, which is a really important period and a time of high stress for the ewes,” Mr Bourne said.

“We now select our lambing paddocks in autumn and close them off from all sheep for March and April. This prevents further worm contamination in those areas, and when followed by the cold winter months when worm eggs don’t develop, we are now seeing reduced worm populations during spring lambing.”

WormBoss was developed in 2005 by the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC) and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI).

Since then WormBoss training workshops have been delivered both to producers and industry advisers to help industry to reduce the cost of worms, and the program recently revamped its website, www.wormboss.com.au, to provide worm management tools and advice direct to the fingertips of producers.

The WormBoss website brings together the latest research and localises the development of management plans to suit different operating environments, so that producers can maximise the effectiveness of drenching and other worm management practices. The site also provides links to leading advisers in each state; grazing management and breeding advice; information on resistance and immunity; and the influence of nutrition.

Mr Bourne participated in a WormBoss training course two years ago, with the advice clarifying his understanding of the problem and providing a clear management strategy for his property.



An Australian Government Initiative



Mr Bourne runs the 1000-hectare property 'Box Hill' at Ben Lomond, in the high summer rainfall area of the NSW Northern Tablelands, in conjunction with his wife Nicole and parents Geoff and Myreen.

The family operation includes both sheep and cattle, run on established improved pastures of phalaris, fescues and clover, with the basalt soils receiving some 950mm of annual rainfall – a “classic barber’s pole worm environment”, Mr Bourne said.

With approximately 1000 fine-wool Merino ewes and 900 first-cross ewes for prime lamb production, effective worm management is essential to flock productivity.

Mr Bourne describes his flock management practices as “pretty typical of the New England”, with joining in early April for lambing in early September.

“The WormBoss training really pulled together everything I knew so I could then apply my knowledge in a coordinated and strategic way, and it’s great that the advice is now available online in a user-friendly format,” he said.

“I can see myself referring back to WormBoss website for the latest research and advice for worm control specific to this area, and to check my management plan as well as use the Drench Decision Guide.

“Prior to the training, we were drenching our adult sheep up to five times a year, including a long-acting drench before lambing, but now we’re getting much better results through the combination of improved grazing management and aiming for just two short-acting applications.”

The spring drench is given two to three weeks prior to the commencement of lambing, irrespective of worm egg counts, in order to protect ewes during this stressful period.

Mr Bourne’s father takes worm counts every four weeks over summer with the second drench usually occurring in autumn, with timing dependent on when the population exceeds threshold levels.

The acceptable thresholds for worm populations have also been re-assessed based on the figures in the WormBoss Drench Decision Guides, and are now set according to the quality of available pasture and the condition of the stock. While the thresholds may vary throughout a season, the limits have been raised in order to encourage natural resilience within the flock and to minimise the risk of excessive chemical use.

“Even though the thresholds have gone up and we’ve reduced our drenching program, there has been no reduction in production or any signs of animal health problems,” Mr Bourne said. “Our sheep are no longer exposed to excessively high worm burdens, and they are now on a nice, even plain of production.”

Drench chemicals are rotated with each use to reduce the risk of resistance developing to the active ingredients. The new WormBoss website provides a database of recommended drenches, and the online Drench Decision Guide helps producers assess their strategy through a series of questions before making specific drench recommendations.

The WormBoss training has also resulted in improved record keeping across the farm, which Mr Bourne said has resulted in benefits to paddock management and animal nutrition.

“I now feel like we’re much more in control of our worm loads and the business as a whole thanks to the WormBoss program,” Mr Bourne said.

- For more information on worm management strategies for different areas of Australia, visit www.wormboss.com.au.

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