

Owning a Small Sheep Enterprise

Fact Sheet series for the
Small Rural Landholder

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Many owners of smaller properties are often confronted with their first experience of buying and being responsible for grazing livestock. This is very much part of the appeal of moving to a rural location and becoming connected with a new way of life in a farming environment such as southern Victoria.

Because sheep are smaller and appear easier to handle than cattle, they can be an attractive first step into farming. This may well be the case but there are a number of factors to be considered which are summarised as follows:

Fencing

You will need to check boundary fencing to be sure you can contain your sheep and also keep unwanted stock from wandering onto your land. Pay particular attention to roadside boundary fencing to ensure that your sheep will not be able to escape and pose a risk to passing traffic.

Water

Are all paddocks supplied with a reliable source of suitable water and can sheep access it?

- Some properties may have troughs suitable for cattle, but they may be too high for smaller sheep and lambs to reach. Similarly, some farm dams can be very boggy around the edge of the water and older or weaker sheep can become stuck in the mud.

Yards

Are there yards in which you can hold and work on sheep, and is there an adjoining shed you can use or adapt for crutching and shearing if necessary?

- Portable yards can be useful for this purpose.

Shearing

If you intend having a breed which requires shearing and crutching, is the district serviced by local shearers and are they interested in shearing your sheep?

- It is important to determine if local contractors can provide the shearing and wool handling equipment you need for the job. So discussion with other local sheep owners may answer that question.

Breed choices

Most sheep-growing regions tend to be in the medium-to-lower rainfall zones with only some breeds suitable for grazing in higher rainfall areas. These tend to be either British breeds or crossbred sheep involving a British breed.

Low maintenance breeds which naturally shed their wool each year, such as Dorpers, Wiltshire Horns and Wiltipolls are popular options. Only some of the very fine wool strains of Merino sheep are suited to the higher rainfall areas.

Do you see other people running these breeds, or any sheep at all? It may be a good idea to contact local sheep owners and learn of their experiences with raising sheep in the area.

Knowledge, Skills and Mentoring

Do you have the animal husbandry knowledge to look after the sheep's welfare, provide adequate nutrition, identify disease problems, and administer veterinary products when necessary?

- If you are able to identify and establish a mentoring relationship with another experienced sheep producer this will be a great advantage.



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COMMON
GROUND



Key management considerations

- Apply for a Property Identification Code (PIC) number
- Sheep are well-suited to spring lambing
- Secure your boundary fences to ensure stock containment
- Make sure smaller sheep can reach water troughs if sharing with cattle
- If owning sheep requiring shearing make sure there are local shearers available
- Use vaccination to avoid preventable diseases

Reference

Department of Primary Industries (2013). Sheep Notes, Autumn 2013



This project is supported by South Gippsland Landcare Network through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme.

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Do you have the necessary equipment to administer these veterinary chemicals which are usually sold in quantities for larger enterprises?

- Small numbers of animals may not justify the sorts of quantities and the expenses these veterinary chemicals involve.

Will there be someone around to monitor the sheep's welfare?

- This will be necessary every day if ewes are lambing or in hot summer weather to check on water supplies. You may be able to share this responsibility in a reciprocal arrangement with your neighbour.

Are there enough paddocks when you need to separate different animals such as lambs from ewes or rams from ewes?

- The more paddocks available, the easier it is to have some management over the grazing pressure on pastures.

Dogs and Foxes

If your property is on the edge of a national park or adjacent to urban areas near country towns, dog attacks may be a problem. Check with your neighbours to see if they are successfully running sheep or if they know of any ongoing problems. If you can't see other farmers grazing sheep in your district, then there may be a good reason why.

Stray dogs can be a problem any time of the year whereas foxes are mainly a threat at lambing time and will particularly target new-born lambs who are weaker (often the smaller twin) or struggling to keep up with their mothers.

A degree of fox control can be achieved with well-designed, multi-wire functioning electric fencing which makes traversing your property through fences an unpleasant experience for the fox.

Property Identification Code (PIC) number

One of the first tasks if you intend to own livestock is to contact the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport & Resources (DEDJTR) for a Property Identification Code (PIC) number. Phone 1800 678 779.

The purpose of a PIC is partly for tracing residue problems, but also for locating properties and owners who have livestock in an area threatened by a disease outbreak.

It is **IMPORTANT** to know that without a PIC and the accompanying Vendor Declaration book of forms you **WILL NOT** be able to sell stock through saleyards or abattoirs.

Selling livestock

When you do want to sell some animals how close is the nearest saleyard and can a local livestock carrier safely access your yards to transport them?

In recent years many smaller, local saleyard facilities have disappeared and producers now have to transport animals to the major regional centres. Talk to a local livestock selling agent for more information.

Alternatively there may be scope for marketing your lambs through retail and restaurant outlets that are keen to have a locally identified brand which appeals to their customers. This will likely require a cooperative approach by a number of sheep producers to build the necessary relationships with abattoirs and butchers.

Summary

All of this may sound a bit daunting, but every prospective sheep owner needs to consider these matters before they decide on which grazing alternative best suits them and their property.

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