

Welfare decisions for sheep

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At times sheep are subject to dramatic loss in body condition due to reduced feed intake. This is most common during drought. As animals lose condition, their general health, fertility and ability to rear a lamb suffers. There is also a substantial decline in carcase and wool value.

Animals in extremely poor condition will not have sufficient body reserves to withstand mustering, yarding, transport or sale. They are weak and at risk of death under physically demanding conditions or stress, such as in very cold or very hot weather. Community standards dictate that animals should not be allowed to reach such a poor state of condition. It is also illegal.

Decisions about feeding and whether animals are fit for transport or sale need to be made by livestock managers, advisors, transport operators and welfare officials. Decisions also need to be made regarding humane destruction on the property if warranted.

These are difficult decisions and place the people making them under a great deal of emotional stress.

This document provides clear, practical guidelines on how to assess sheep in poor condition, and on making decisions about the management of these animals.

Assessing animals

Figure 1 shows the key sites for assessing an animal's status. Use the chart on the following page to decide on the status of animals and the action required.

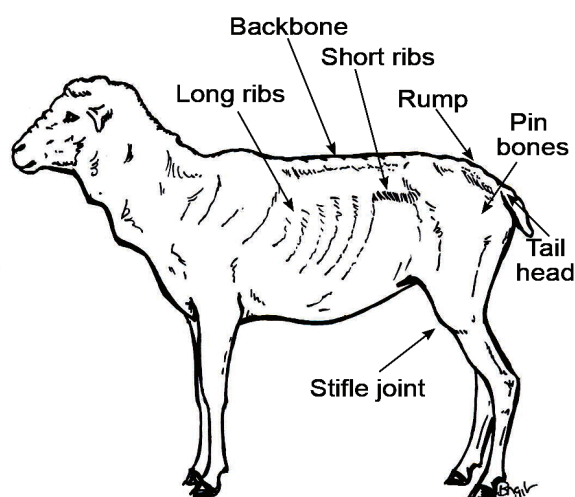
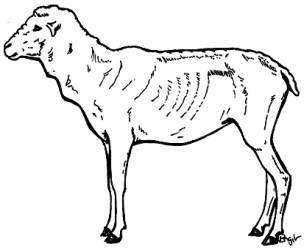
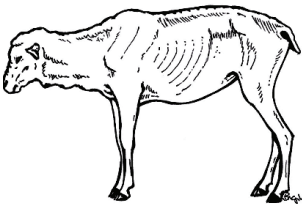


Figure 1. Key assessment sites

Welfare decisions

	Fat score – 1 at risk	Welfare score – high risk	Euthanase
			
General description	Lean but strong and healthy, with limited muscle wastage. Reduced reproductive performance likely.	Significant muscle wastage. Unlikely to conceive. At risk of death from cold, wet weather or other stress. Recovery is dependent on high quality care.	Weak with extremely low body reserves. Animal is recumbent. At point of death.
Backbone	Visible.	Spines of backbone identifiable.	Spines of backbone easily identifiable.
Short ribs	Slightly visible individually, more so in Merino sheep.	Prominent and very sharp to touch.	Very prominent and easy to see individually.
Inside pin bones	Slightly sunken.	Sunken.	Deeply sunken to the bone.
Muscle wastage	Rump muscle concave.	Rump muscle concave. Muscle wastage in loin and leg muscle evident.	Obvious over whole body. Rump and leg muscles deeply concave.
Stifle joint	Stifle joint not identifiable.	Stifle joint not identifiable.	Stifle joint identifiable.
Tail bones	Individual bones not identifiable.	Individual bones just able to be felt.	Individual bones easily felt.
Appearance	Bright, alert.	Able to stand but listless, dull.	Lacking energy, dull and listless, recumbent, may not be able to raise head off the ground.
Mobility	Normal gait.	Mobile, able to lie down and rise but with some difficulty, may seem to 'teeter' whilst standing.	Cannot get up, may be kicking hind legs.
Critical issues			
Lambing requirements & risks associated with lambing	Some assistance required, high possibility of losing lamb during birth or on first day after birth. High possibility of pregnancy toxemia and/or hypocalcaemia. Separate pregnant animals within this fat score range and care for and feed a high energy supplement separately. Necessary to seek advice on adequate feeding from a professional (e.g. veterinarian or NSW DPI Livestock Officer).	Will need a lot of assistance – ewe and lamb may not survive. Very high possibility of pregnancy toxemia.	Extremely unlikely that lamb and ewe will survive lambing.
Transport, sale	Suitable for transport and sale but with minimum time off feed.	Unsuitable for sale through saleyards or transport over long distances.	Cannot travel.
Action required	• Must be fed adequately to prevent further weight loss. • Suitable for transport to agistment. • Suitable for sale but must not be kept off feed or water for extended periods. • Supervise and be ready to assist during lambing – supervise lamb after birth.	• Must be fed adequately immediately to prevent weight loss. • Not suitable for transport over long distances.	• Destroy on-farm or seek veterinary assistance to do so.

Criteria for destruction on property

Some sheep may require humane destruction on property. They should be destroyed if they are in poor or very poor condition as described above and meet any of the following conditions.

- They fall down or are knocked over easily.
- They are unable to stand without assistance.
- They have a very unsteady gait, staggering, kicking of the hind legs.
- Adequate good quality feed cannot be provided.
- Adequate good quality water cannot be provided.
- It is uneconomical or not possible to transport, sell or feed due to circumstances. Fat score 1 sheep may also need to be destroyed if found in circumstances where it is genuinely not possible to prevent further suffering. It is not acceptable to allow sheep to deteriorate any further.

Primefact 310, *Humane destruction of stock* outlines acceptable methods for humane destruction should it be required

Action must be taken with regard to all three categories of sheep described. There are no extenuating circumstances and inaction will be considered an act of cruelty.

References

Managing Drought 6th Edition 2006 NSW Department of Primary Industries.

Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for the Land Transport of Livestock.

NSW Lifetime Wool newsletter Volume 2, Issue 2, April 2006, NSW Department of Primary Industries.

Primefact 310 *Humane destruction of stock*.

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