
PROBLEMS OF A WEST COAST SHEEP AND CATTLE FARMER

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OUR property is situated at Ikamatua, 30 miles from Greymouth, on the Greymouth-Reefton state highway. On the southern side, the property is bounded by the Big Grey River and on the western side the boundary is the Rough River; in fact, three rivers — the Big Grey, the Little Grey, and the Rough, meet at the south-west corner of the property.

My two brothers and I farm in partnership a property of 3,000 acres of mainly terrace soils with some recent, alluvial river flats. Three thousand acres sounds huge, but about 800 acres of this is either not developed or is undeveloped; in other words, there are really 700 acres yet to be put into good grass and 100 acres stacker dredge tailings which are useless. We are fortunate in having a rainfall of between 50 and 60 inches annually. Normally, my two partners and I, plus one full-time worker, are the labour force.

The normal carrying capacity is 4,000 breeding ewes, 1,200 ewe hoggets, and 80 to 90 rams; these are of the straight Romney breed. Besides flock ewes, we have also a small stud of both Romney and Southdowns, and last winter we carried 350 stud Romney ewes, 190 stud Southdowns, with 300 stud ewe hoggets of both Romney and Southdown, and 180 stud rams. By owning our own stud, we are able to use our own rams over the flock ewes.

Besides sheep we run breeding cows, mainly of the black poll breed, and these total 120 black poll cows and 3 bulls. We buy in and fatten cattle, so that we sell annually 300 to 400 of varying ages.

Crops

Usually, 40 to 50 acres are cultivated for swedes and choumoellier for winter use and this is sown down to new grass with a sprinkling of soft turnips. Since the crop area is normally taken from cut-over bush terrace country, after raking to clear the logs we disc and sow swedes and choumoellier, depending on the season, after Christmas. After feeding off, the area is ploughed and worked to grass and turnips,

Fertilizers

The terrace country is classified as Ikamatua fine sands and silt loams and is marginally cobalt deficient. Cobaltized superphosphate is therefore used annually at a rate of from 2 to 2½ cwt per acre on all terrace soils and a similar quantity of 44/46 superphosphate on the river flats. Our policy with lime is dependent upon the state of the country, but we usually like to disc in 1 to 2 tons of lime before sowing the winter feed crop; this is followed with a further ton of lime when sowing to grass. After grassing, the area is given an extra ton of lime per acre so that, in all, a total of 4 tons of lime is sown within two years. Thereafter, lime is applied at a ton per acre as a maintenance dressing, generally every 3 to 4 years.

Hay

Winter feed consists of a crop plus hay. Red clover has proved particularly valuable for hay, and the aim is to make between 2,000 and 3,000 bales annually. Winters in the area can be fairly frosty so we are perhaps not as reliant on autumn-saved pasture as could otherwise be the case. However, we still try to save 40 to 60 acres annually.

Stock Management

Ewes are generally held fairly tight; after the fat lambs have been taken, and with natural growth and soft pastures, some flushing is done before the rams are turned out with the flock ewes in March and April. We start off in a small way and then gradually put in fresh rams as the season advances. This means that lambing is spread over August and September. Generally, the Southdown is used on the 2-tooths, that is, on 1,000 to 1,200 2-tooths, and from 4-tooth up the straight Romney is used. Naturally, all the cross-bred ewes and wether lambs are taken as fats; and we aim at fattening the Romney wether lambs so generally we try to take the first draft fat from the mother in early January.

Shearing

We shear only once a year, anywhere from November to February depending on when local shearers are available (we do not contract shear). This may involve some difficulty at shearing time if shearing and haymaking should coincide. We shear any tail-end lambs and all replacement

ewe hoggets. There is no classing done in the shed and we think this factor saves the labour of one man. Perhaps we are unusual in that we scour the second shear and lambs' wool; we think it pays, as we have had 85% yield with scouring. As an example, last year we scoured bellies and pieces and received 79d. per pound. If shearing and hay-making coincide, casual labour may need to be employed for haymaking. We are fortunate in being able to obtain weekend assistance from the N.Z. Forest Service's Woodman's School at Reefton.

Replacements

All replacement lambs are drenched towards the end of May with thiabendazole and nicotine sulphate. Worms are troublesome — so much so, that drenched animals must be put on clean paddocks if reinfestation is to be avoided. In spite of claims to the contrary, there does not appear to be a single drench on the market which is highly effective against all worms; hence, for the last two years, 'we have been using thiabendazole and nicotine sulphate, and, before that, phenothiazine and nicotine sulphate.

The impression may have been gained that we are understocked. But although we have about 60 cast Southdowns and 700 to 800 cast Romney flock ewes annually, it depends entirely upon the market whether we quit these at Addington or not. With large numbers we believe in flexibility, so that sometimes we might hold our culls for another year, and sometimes, if the market is right, we will sell quickly.

Problems

The problems of a West Coast sheep farmer, discounting that of weather conditions which faces all farmers, include the following :

THE INCREASING NEED FOR WINTER FEED IF STOCK NUMBERS ARE TO INCREASE

This means a reliance on swedes, choumoellier and hay, and, in wet seasons, can involve late sowings, or even a switch to ryecorn. Greater reliance will now and in the future have to fall on autumn-saved pasture.

SHEEP BREEDS

There is no doubt that the Romney ewe and the Down-type ram win for fattening production, but wool types,

because of the climate, are of a coarser nature than is normal in Canterbury conditions. As an estimate, many Coast properties could carry easily three ewes per acre with very little development, and the cattle ration could also include one beast to five acres.

LABOUR DIFFICULTIES

The difficulties of acquiring labour, owing to the higher wages offering in mines and sawmills, makes double shearing a problem for most West Coast farmers. In general, double shearing appears to be slowly declining except in the case of hoggets, and it appears desirable to shear lambs after the first draft has been taken. Double shearing brings with it the need for more feed, particularly immediately after shearing, and this combined with sudden cold snaps and wet periods, has made double shearing a calculated risk.

INSECT PESTS

The greatest grass pest is the subterranean caterpillar, and late flying types are often encountered. Grass-grub, of course, occurs on terrace soils and in some seasons can be bad. The new DDT regulations may unconsciously slacken off the fight against these pests.

EROSION AND DRAINAGE

These are problems common to Coast sheep farmers. Probably the biggest problem is drainage, which is hampered by the lack of co-operation from some property owners.

STOCK HEALTH

Stock health generally is satisfactory although cobalt deficiency and some copper deficiency are widespread, particularly on terrace soils. The main problem is worms and the time of drenching appears to be of as much importance as the type of drench used: allied to this is the need for fresh pastures.

Footrot is not widespread, nor is facial eczema a problem; there are occasional outbreaks of scabby mouth, pulpy kidney and of course lice.

FINANCE

Maintenance and development costs are of course high and a look at West Coast fences would clearly indicate the need for some incentive or subsidy on fencing.

Takeover bids and mergers of stock firms are not in the best interests of the average Coast farmer; the lack of competition is hindering rather than helping the smaller farmer.

Short-term seasonal finance is necessary, particularly on a tight unit, and can be obtained only from stock firms or through the generosity of a Bank — if Banks are generous these days. On the question of finance, the soundest advice to those contemplating farming on the West Coast is to remember that development capital is difficult to obtain from almost any source; this may be because of the small equity farmers have in some farms. As a general guide, Government capital valuations are a fair indication and the new settler would be well advised to borrow to purchase, and to hold his own liquid cash for development.

Land values throughout the Coast are lower than in most other New Zealand areas, but freight charges for almost every item, including the marketing of stock, are high.

As an example, freight costs to or from Ikamatua are: Truck to Addington, £13 10s.; Truck to Islington, £13 2s. 6d.; Lime from Ross, fl 0s. 5d. and 4s. for covers; Super. ex Hornby (bulk), f2 7s. per ton; and with recent freight rises these will undoubtedly increase.

Conclusion

The problems of the West Coast farmer are those of climate and terrain and not, as some believe, of outlook. The following figures indicate that, though dairying is reasonably static in the area (and probably affected by Tb. testing), the average sheep and cattle farmer in the Inangahua county is accepting the challenge of increased production.

STOCK NUMBERS INANGAHUA COUNTY

				% change	
	1952	1959	1962	10 years	3 years
Total sheep	22,666	41,397	53,214	+125%	+ 23%
Total dairy cattle	3,261	3,359	5,547	-0.8%	- 4%
Total beef cattle	3,909	4,289		+ 42%	+27%