



Sheep with 12 months wool growth or more will suffer considerable stress and even exhaustion resulting in death, unless they are shorn before the onset of summer heat each year.

While large scale farmers shear their sheep at least once a year, the same cannot be said for some lifestyle farmers. Perhaps lifestyle farmers are not aware of, or don't understand, the risks to the animals' welfare when sheep miss the annual shearing and in some cases end up with two years wool growth.

A visit from a Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) Animal Welfare Investigator or the RNZSPCA may also be the outcome.

Often the excuse given is "I cannot find a shearer who is willing to shear small numbers of sheep" or that there are no shearing facilities or even electricity – not uncommon on some lifestyle farms. Another excuse is "something else got in the way and I never got around to it".

However, the simple truth is that no excuse is ever acceptable. If a decision is made to purchase sheep for a lifestyle block or otherwise, consideration must be given to ensuring normal management practices (including shearing) can be carried out in a timely and responsible manner. Don't own sheep unless this commitment can be given without exception.

Sheep with 12 months wool growth or more will suffer heat stress and exhaustion during hot summer conditions, particularly where shade is not available. The reason for this is that sheep, unlike humans, cannot regulate their body temperature by sweating; they rely on air crossing their tongues during respiration ("panting") to cool their bodies down.

Their respiration rate will increase as the atmospheric temperature increases. This can easily be observed in sheep during hot weather, or when sheep are placed under pressure during mustering or yarding. Where the respiration rate becomes excessive the animal will die from exhaustion and heat stress and often there is very little warning of impending death.

Its not just heat stress in summer that needs to be considered though. Sheep with excessive wool growth may have their welfare compromised at other times of the year – often these sheep will be carrying excessive amounts of wet or dried faeces which are very attractive to flies and cause fly strike, a serious animal welfare condition that if left untreated may result in death. Fly strike is avoidable.

Sheep also like to roll on the ground, particularly after a shower of rain. A shorn sheep is much more likely to get to its feet again compared to a sheep with a long fleece. A sheep on its back with a heavy fleece will die quickly in the height of summer and long fleeces will also get caught up more easily in wire, netting, gorse and blackberry.

November and December are good months to have your sheep shorn, before the high summer temperatures arrive. Make an appointment with your shearer early to ensure availability, or even better, book for the same dates each year. Shearers like to know they have regular clients.

Have your sheep been shorn yet?

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ANIMAL WELFARE fact sheet 1

The *Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the welfare of sheep* recommend sheep should be shorn as frequently as is necessary to mitigate animal health and welfare concerns. Usually this would be once a year.

In winter, and in districts subject to very cold weather, and in areas where there is minimal natural shelter, or where shearing is undertaken prior to lambing, sheep should be shorn using winter, snow or cover combs, lifters, or blade shears to ensure the sheep retain an insulating layer of wool.

Sheep should not be shorn if the forecast is for cold wet weather unless the animals are to be given additional feed after shearing and/or provided with suitable shelter minimising the risk of exposure.

Shearing, dagging and crutching should be carried out skilfully and carefully to ensure that shearing cuts, especially those to the teats, vulva and prepuce are kept to a minimum. Freshly shorn sheep should not be kept in dusty yards for longer than necessary, as shearing cuts may be a potential access site for the pathogens causing infections.

Provision should be made for extra feed, shade and shelter for sheep after shearing. There should be ready access to covered yards or effective shelter for several weeks after shearing where there is risk of cold wet weather or hot sunny weather.

As sheep with a full rumen may suffer distress while being shorn they are best fasted. The time off feed should not be for more than a few hours in pregnant ewes.

Good farmers and stock people speak about “empathy” with their animals. That is, they mentally put themselves in the same position as their animals and ask the question “how would I feel or react to the same conditions?”

This is a good principle to follow and will mean the welfare of the animal is always paramount and protected at all times. A well cared for sheep is a profitable one.

For further information, including Codes of Welfare, minimum standards and recommended best practice, visit: www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare

Play a part in preventing the unnecessary pain and suffering of animals by reporting animals in distress to MAF on **0800 327 027**