

Live Sheep Export Submission

John Neil



My preference, in the short term, would be for option 4, no probation. In my opinion live export is a vital part of mixed a farming operation. Live export of wethers provides the flexibility to maintain a sustainable and profitable farm. This market provides options which are better for the stock, better for the farmer and better for the environment, especially in our drying climate.

In the longer term I would hope that the government would assist in the establishment of alternate markets for the wethers typically exported to the middle-east. As mentioned in the report, the wethers suitable for export are of a lower quality and not suitable for the local abattoirs for the trade market. Thus allowing a phasing out of the live export trade.

The options of restricting the trade between May to September would be reducing options in the most critical period for making seasonal stocking rate adjustments.

I run a dryland farm in the Great Southern region of Western Australia.

The farm is approximately 1800ha in size. Approximately 1200ha is cleared and used for farming, the remaining 600ha is primarily for land care and is fenced off and not stocked or cropped, providing an area for native vegetation and animals.

On the 1200ha used for farming, approximately 400ha is cropped and the remaining 800ha is used for stock. I use this ratio as it is a good compromise between enterprises to give a stable yearly income. The smallish percentage of cropped country reduces my chemical use and the associated problems of weed resistance and environmental impact of the cropping chemicals.

This ratio of cropped area to stocked area is adjusted depending on the “break” of the season, the cropped area being decreased and the stocked area increased the later the break comes. This approach provides a mechanism to protected against over stocking if the season conditions decline.

The income generated typically is about 1/3 from grain production, 1/3 from meat production and 1/3 from wool production. This small amount of diversification provides a reasonable level of income security.

On the stocked area I run a self replacing merino flock, consisting of 4000 mated ewes. 3000 of the ewes are mated to merino rams, and 1000 to terminal sires. I also carry through approximately 1250 merino ewe lambs and 1250 wether lambs. The ewe lambs are used to maintain breeding stock.

In a typical year I get approximately 3300 lambs, 2500 merino lambs and 800 xbred lambs for the local lamb market. To maintain the stock I sell approximately 3000 sheep a year, 1000 old ewes to the local mutton market, 800 lambs to the local lamb market, 200 or so cull sheep to the local stock yards, I guess for the pet food market and 1000 wethers to the live export market. The short fall either have died on the property of natural causes or have been considered of no commercial value so have been put down on the property.

The problem is what to do with the merino wethers. The merino sheep are slower growing than the cross bred lambs so will not typically make the conditions necessary for sale to the local lamb market before the end of spring.

There are a few options I have considered,

1. One option is to try to feed them so they are suitable for the lamb market in late summer or autumn. The problem with this approach is I would be trying to fatten sheep when it is most difficult and expensive to do so as there is no grass available.
2. Sell the sheep. Unfortunately the merino wether lambs are not in high demand during summer as they are not suitable for slaughter and there is not a lot of feed around to fatten them. Also they are slow growing so less attractive to the local feedlotter.
3. Keep the sheep on basically maintenance feed and sell them to the live export trade the following year, between July and January the next year depending on the seasonal conditions.

I choose to keep the sheep through, as this gives me additional flexibility and options.

As mentioned I adjust my cropping ratio depending on the season at the break, and then I adjust my sheep numbers later if the winter or spring rainfall is low. Unfortunately early I cannot sell my breeding ewes as they will be either in lamb or have lamb at foot during this period. I don't want to sell my merino ewe lambs as they are my future breeding stock. The best option is to reduce my merino wether mob.

If the season is good I can keep the wethers through until December, get some additional wool and then sell them either the live export or mutton market. If the season is bad I can sell them early to the live export market. At this point the live export market is the best option as the sheep will typically not be in a killable condition for the local market (it's a bad season after all) and too small for the mutton market.

It is critical in a poor season that I can reduce more stock numbers as soon as possible, as the longer the stock are held the more they eat, and the less FOO will be available for the long dry summer and autumn months.

This is where the export market is most critical, as the sooner I can reduce my numbers the better. In some years I have started to offload sheep in July. Having to wait until October will make a bad season very much worse.

As a farmer, I think the best way to reduce the impacts of droughts is to reduce the stock rates as quickly as possible for a reasonable price. The money will enable me to carry on when things improve. Any delay will mean less feed available, what is available will be more expensive and as a result the stock will be in poorer condition, which is worse for the farmer, the stock and the environment. Although this approach gives flexibility for a 1 or 2 year drought I think anything beyond that is headed for disaster.

As a farmer clearly I am concerned about stock welfare, as it is difficult to make money out of stock in poor condition. But I cannot understand why, when there is a market for the live export wethers, and this market provides options which are better for the stock, better for the farmer and better for the environment, the government completely shuts down this market instead of working to improve it.

I suppose a fifth option is not mentioned, which is for people to pay more for their food. Currently I can make a reasonable living from my farm for my family, but not as high an income as I received when working as a software engineer in Perth. However I only achieve this by running high stocking rates. If I was to receive higher prices perhaps I could reduce my stocking rates, have more FOO, and be able to hold my stock until outside of the northern summer months.