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EFFECT OF CONTINUOUS STOCKING
OF BREEDING EWES
AT DIFFERENT SWARD SURFACE HEIGHTS
DURING THE LATE SUMMER-AUTUMN
ON HERBAGE INTAKE AND PRODUCTIVITY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Agricultural Science
in Animal Science
at Massey University
New Zealand

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Continuous stocking management is preferred by many New Zealand sheep farmers during the late summer-autumn period. At present, there are no guidelines available to farmers that define the optimum sward conditions for continuous stocking management of ewes leading up to, and during, the mating period. Three different nominal sward surface heights (SSH) (2, 4, and 6 cm) replicated twice were used for a trial with 14 mixed age breeding ewes per treatment (n=84 ewes) continuously stocked from February to April 1994. The pastures consisted of predominantly 10-year old ryegrass (Lolium perenne), white clover (Trifolium repens) and browntop (Agrostis capillaris). Sward heights were measured weekly throughout the trial. Herbage intakes by the ewes were determined indirectly from faecal output using chromic oxide controlled release capsules and in vitro digestibility of digesta samples obtained from oesophageal-fistulated sheep run with the ewes.

The average actual sward surface heights for the 2, 4, and 6 cm SSH treatments were 2.7 vs 4.3 vs 6.1 cm (± 0.05 cm (SEM), P<0.001). The pasture characteristics in terms of herbage mass, dead matter content and organic matter digestibility (OMD) for the 2, 4, and 6 cm SSH treatments were: 2723 vs 3880 vs 4337 (± 204 kg DM/ha, P<0.05); 69.74 vs 64.62 vs 51.37 (± 2.78%, P<0.05); 66.52 ± 0.85 vs 60.29 ± 0.90 vs 69.56 ± 0.84% (P<0.01). The daily liveweight gain, condition score, wool growth rate and mean fibre diameter for ewes grazing the 2, 4, and 6 cm SSH treatments were: 103 vs 122 vs 195 (± 15 g/day, P<0.05); 2.89 vs 3.05 vs 3.23 (± 0.06 condition score units, P<0.1); 1.30 vs 1.26 vs 1.41 (± 0.03 mg/cm²/day, P<0.1); 43.01 vs 44.07 vs 44.48 (± 0.35 microns, P>0.1).

The results suggest that swards of at least 6 cm height are required to support adequate liveweight gain and condition score of breeding ewes in the period prior to and during mating. The accumulation of weed and dead material appear to be the major problems limiting intake and ewe performance.

**Keywords**  Continuous stocking; late summer-autumn; sward height; breeding ewes
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude and sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Dr. S.T. Morris and Professor S.N. McCutcheon for their invaluable guidance and encouragement in all aspects of my studies including the preparation of this manuscript.

I am extremely grateful to Professor W.J. Parker of the Department of Agricultural and Horticultural Systems Management for his constructive criticism towards the preparation and presentation of this manuscript at the New Zealand Society of Animal Production Annual Conference.

I would also like to convey my thanks to those who have helped me during the experimental work: Kerry Kilmister, Dean Burnham, John Williamson, Hamsun Husain, Penny Back, Yvette Cottam and Marjorie Elwin.

Thanks are extended to staff of the Nutrition Laboratories in the Animal Science Department for chromium and herbage in vitro digestibility analysis.

My sincere gratitude to Professor D.J. Garrick and Dr. P.C.H. Morel for statistical advice.

My special thanks to all staff and postgraduate students at the Department of Animal Science for their help and hospitality during the period of my study.

I gratefully acknowledge The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) for providing me a scholarship and the C. Alma Baker Trust for financial support for the research programme.

Finally to my mother, brother and sisters, and to my Kiwi parents, Rod and Myrle Watt for their prayer and moral support.

Above all, I thank and praise my God, Lord Jesus Christ for He always guides me along the path of my life. To Him be all the glory and praise.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late father who encouraged me to undertake further study. He has played a significant role in my achievement so far.
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