GRASS SEEDS

KEY MESSAGES

1. Grass seeds are a costly condition to the entire supply chain causing significant economic loss of up to $50 million annually.
2. Live weight losses can be significant (50%).

What are grass seeds?

Grass seeds reported at the abattoir refer to seeds found in the carcass (in the muscle) and are of most significance in high value cuts. Spear grass, brome grass, barley grass, geranium, silver grass and Chilean needle grass are the most common species responsible for seedy carcasses.

Causes

As lambs and sheep graze on or walk through seedy pastures, seeds are collected in the wool and then enter the body within days. The greatest risk period for picking up seeds is October to January in most regions.

Condition on farm

- **Live weight losses** – due to reduced feed intake and discomfort associated with seed penetration (mouth, eyes and skin infection). Research has shown that as few as 25 seeds per animal can result in a 50% reduction in daily weight gain.
- **Reduced wool production and value** – rough, discoloured wool from biting or rubbing, and price penalties for seedy wool.
- **Deaths** – due to bacterial infections (especially if affected sheep are dipped), flystrike, tetanus, blindness and starvation.

Condition picture in the abattoir

- **Penalty** – up to $1/kg to account for reduced throughput (slowing/stopping of the chain), excess labour and time to trim.
- **Trimming** – can result in significant reduction in carcass/dressed weight.
- **Carcass downgrading** – from a high value chilled product to a low value frozen product.
- **Carcass condemnation** – if the carcass has evidence of sepsis ("blood poisoning").

Treatment

Individual lambs and sheep may require treatment for flystrike or infections.

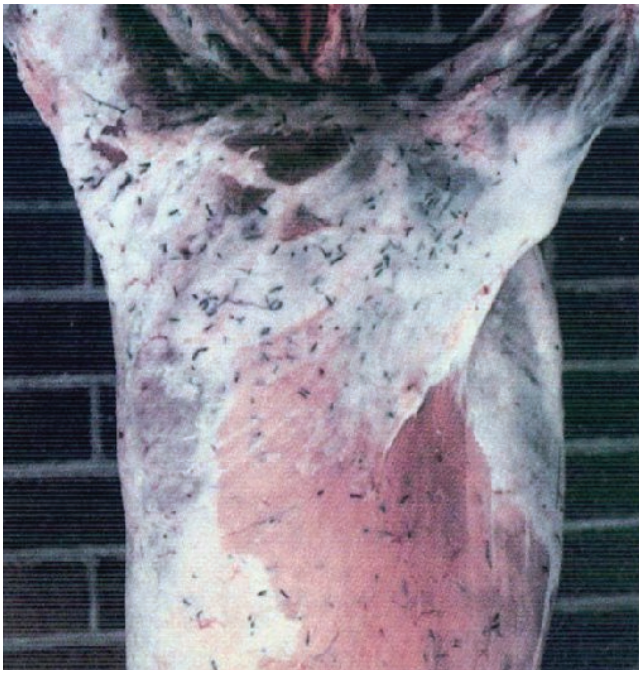

Image provided by MINTRAC

Prevention

Producers should consider as many of the following options that may be achievable on farm to help reduce the incidence of seedy carcasses. Options will vary dramatically, based on region, flock structure and production system.

- Pasture (and soil) improvement to minimise grass seeds
  - » Ensure a strong perennial base where possible.
  - » Consider lucerne use, particularly in cropping rotations.
  - » Improve soil fertility to allow pasture species to out-compete weeds.
  - » Work with your local agronomist to tailor a program that best suits your property.
- Strategic grazing to minimise seed set and access to seeds
  - » Heavy grazing and/or slashing (or burning) during emergence of seed head development but before seed set.
  - » Stagger crop sowings to ensure enough seed-free paddocks for lamb and weaner production.
  - » Slash strips to dams and tracks in and around sheep camps.
  - » Graze both sides of shelter belts hard and early to reduce grass seed maturation.
- Other management options
  - » Early weaning onto prepared pastures or into a feedlot, containment area or yards.
  - » Shearing lambs before seeds set will help reduce grass seed pick-up and skin penetration.
  - » Change production management to finish lambs sooner, or alternatively, sell them to finishers.
  - » Chemical control, including spray grazing, winter cleaning of annual pastures and spray topping (consult local agronomist).
  - » Make hay/silage to create grass seed free paddocks and conserve fodder to be used for finishing.