

# Shearing twice a year – is it worth it?

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## Key messages

- **More frequent shearings add a further layer of complexity to management planning of the operations calendar, particularly when both livestock and cropping enterprises are involved.**
- **There is no clear answer to whether shearing every six or nine months is more advantageous than annual shearings, as many factors must be considered to weigh up the whole farming system costs vs. benefits.**

## Why do the trial?

Good seasonal conditions, improved genetics and/or well-managed nutrition has increased the staple length in Merino sheep on Eyre Peninsula in the past decade. This coupled with discounts for staples outside the current market optimal measures of 63-100 mm for 17 micron wool, and 58-110 mm for 21 micron wool, is prompting some farmers to shear their sheep more often than their regular yearly operation. A growing number of producers are opting to shear sheep every six or eight months to not only target the latest requests for a shorter staple from wool processors, but also with the aim to manipulate their management programs to eliminate or reduce crutching

requirements, and to assist with cash flow throughout the year.

The question is – is it worth it? There are a number of anecdotal experiences across Australia that suggest there are benefits to wool production and quality, and even lamb survival, however there is no solid research that quantifies the benefits of more frequent shearing systems.

Shifting annual shearing to every six or eight months requires analysis of current and future production and profitability, but also involves careful planning to avoid clashing with other farm operations. The sheep management calendar must be planned around key events including joining and lambing dates, and timing of husbandry treatments, whilst keeping in mind cropping operations and seasonal conditions that may affect the livestock production year, to decide if the change can fit into your business and lifestyle.

To address the question ‘is it worth it’, the Minnipa Agricultural Centre (MAC) research sheep flock changed from an annual shearing to shearing every six months, to determine if the production benefits were evident in the 2017/18 season.

## How was it done?

The Minnipa research flock had been benchmarked for adult ewe greasy fleece weight (GFW) from 27 May 2013 to 30 January 2018 (Table 1).

In 2017 the flock was shorn twice in one calendar year for the first time, with fleece weights recorded to determine differences between six and 12 month shearing schedules. In order to fit the timing

of shearing in with other flock husbandry and research activities, as well as the cropping program, it was necessary to shear ewes at nine months first in January 2017, to then be able to undertake six month shearing at optimal times.

## What happened?

The average GFW of the adult (2 to 6 year olds) ewes shorn over these five years/six shearing events was 6.64 kg, which did not include belly fleece weight (weighing approximately 200-500 g). Fleece growth averaged approximately 0.55 g per month.

Due to the timing of joining for the MAC research flock (undertaken for six weeks from February to the middle of March), and because the last shearing occurred at the end of August in 2017, it was necessary to shear ewes with less than six months wool growth. Unfortunately, this meant that fleece staple length was below the ideal minimum length measuring an average of only 48 mm, which was not optimal for market requirements.

For a more accurate understanding of the difference between six and 12 months wool growth, the aim will be to shear ewes in mid-late September 2018 and mid-late March 2019, then to continue with this six month schedule.

As these results show no in-flock comparison within a particular shearing or season due to the whole Minnipa flock being shorn, additional data from other sheep enterprises on Eyre Peninsula will be collated for a more rigorous study of the evaluation of annual versus more frequent shearing.

**Table 1. Minnipa Agricultural Centre research flock adult (2 to 6 year old\*) ewe shearing 2014-2018.**

Year	Ewe number	Date (day/month/year)	Av. months of fleece growth	Ave. greasy fleece weight (kg) **	Greasy fleece weight range (kg) **	Av. production/month (kg)**	Staple length (mm)	Av. ewe production stage
2014	342	28/04/2014	13	6.5	3.4-9.0	0.50	na	2 <sup>nd</sup> trimester pregnant
2015	418	04/06/2015	13	6.8	4.4-9.6	0.52	na	3 <sup>rd</sup> trimester pregnant
2016	400	19/04/2016	11	6.2	3.5-9.5	0.56	na	2 <sup>nd</sup> trimester pregnant
2017 (1)	386	23/01/2017	9	3.8	3.0-5.6	0.42	na	Dry
2017 (2)	346	28/08/2017	7	3.9	2.4-8.6	0.54	61	Lactating
2018 (1)	335	30/01/2018	5	3.3	1.6-5.4	0.66	48	Dry

\*adult ewe shearing does not include maiden ewes (i.e. ewe hoggets)

\*\*does not include belly fleece weight

(#) Shearing event that year

na: not available

### What does this mean?

The MAC research flock's attempt at six month shearing encountered issues that most livestock producers will face if they attempt a more regular shearing schedule than the common annual timing. The major problem was the transition; planning the extra shearing event around other sheep activities and the cropping program, that eventually achieves a six month shearing schedule that meets the ideal staple length for the current market (between 65 mm and 110 mm).

Woolgrowers must research and carefully plan before moving to more frequent shearing. It is important to not chase market requirements wholly,

as requirements can change regularly, and discounts for slightly long or short staple lengths can be negligible. Factors to consider with more frequent shearing involve management (shearing clashing with other livestock or cropping activities), wool production and quality benefits and risks, additional labour and shearing costs, availability of shearers and the time associated with the change. Other associated dynamics of more regular shearing include animal health benefits (reduced flystrike), elimination of crutching, and more regular flock contact to monitor ewe body condition and subsequently improve livestock health and welfare.

As to whether or not it is worth changing from an annual to a more regular shearing will depend on individual enterprise location and operations, seasonal differences, flock genetics, and weighing up the costs and benefits. More research is needed before there is a clear answer.

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