

Agistment

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Agistment is an arrangement between a stock owner and the owner of a short term supply of feed to use that feed. It is a resource that could be used more often, for the benefit of both parties. However, there are some important issues to consider.

Long term use of a paddock, such as for 12 months, should be treated as a lease agreement.

The value of agistment is often quoted as 20 to 30 cents a sheep a week. While this has become an accepted figure, it is not a true reflection of the value of the resource and as a result is often unfair to one party. The true value of agistment should be calculated more accurately.

In good years

In good years, when most people in the district have plenty of sheep feed, the price of agistment should be less – simply because feed is not a scarce resource in those years. In these years agistment often has no monetary value. In other words, both parties gain equally from the sheep grazing the paddock. This is the situation in many years in the cereal growing areas, where there are abundant stubbles and few sheep to utilise them.

An extreme example was the very wet summer of 1992 when there was abundant growth of weeds in stubbles. Many farmers had to control these weeds with chemicals as they did not have enough sheep to control them. Agistment had a negative value that year – some farmers paid for the use of the sheep to control the weeds.

In poor years

In years when farmers have to heavily hand feed, or lot feed, sheep to maintain them, the value of agistment could rise to be similar to the cost of feeding – eg. 50 cents a sheep a week.

Thus, to be fair on both parties and to fully utilise the feed resource, agistment should be valued differently for every situation.

A budget for maintenance feeding versus agistment

Feeding a sheep at home, in a feedlot, may cost 50 cents a sheep a week. Agistment may be available for 30 cents a week. Is it good value?

You have to transport the sheep there and back, which, in this example, costs \$2.50 each way. The break even time for them to be away becomes 25 weeks – at this point both options cost \$12.50 a sheep.

The calculation

While agistment costs 20 cents a week less than feeding, it takes 25 weeks to cover the \$5.00 transport costs (500 cents transport divided by 20 cents a week equals 25 weeks).

If you decide to sell the sheep there, rather than to bring them home, the break even time becomes 11 weeks (250 divided by 20). If transport was only 50 cents each way, the break even time becomes 5 weeks (100 divided by 20).

This calculation does not include other costs, such as travelling to the site to inspect the stock. If there are other costs, add these to the transport costs. If there are other costs involved in feeding, such as labour, add them to the feeding costs per week.

There are also practical issues that need to be considered.

The benefits of feeding the sheep at home

Management may be easier as you have more control (they are close to you and do not have to rely on someone else). You will not bring home lice, resistant worms, or other diseases. You will not bring home weed seeds.

The benefits of agistment

You save the work associated with lot feeding (you could have a holiday !). Your sheep will probably have more feed available than in a maintenance feedlot, so they will grow more wool and be in better condition on their return. This is particularly important if they are to be sold later.

Production agistment

Some agistment supplies much better feed than is needed for maintenance feeding eg. grain legume stubbles. If you are trying to finish, or grow, stock use the same calculation as above but the cost of feeding will be more. To finish prime lambs in a feedlot can cost \$1.50 a week. This can make agistment very attractive – if the sheep grow just as well on agistment.

To reduce the risk of weed seeds being carried from one farm to another, hold the sheep in a feedlot, or a yard, on a high hay ration for 1 to 2 weeks, depending on the risk. The sheep will expel all weed seeds in the feedlot area where they can be controlled.

Consider shearing, or crutching, the sheep if they have seed on their wool.

To calculate the value of a grain legume, throw a quadrat out a number of times in the paddock. Collect the legume seeds from these throws and weigh them. Then calculate the weight of grain a hectare. The weight of grain in grams a square metre, multiplied by 10, equals the weight in kg a hectare. Sheep can utilise all except the last 50 kg a hectare, so deduct this from the result.

Cross bred lambs, once they are accustomed to the grain, will eat about 1 kg of grain a day. You can then calculate the number of grazing days available in the paddock, and its value to you per week.

Other considerations

Transport regulations

Consult your stock agents, or animal health adviser, to ensure that all requirements for stock movements are met. If they are agisted far away (eg. interstate) they may not be permitted to return.

Travelling conditions

Do not let hungry sheep out into paddocks containing lush feed, or plants that could poison them. If possible feed hay in yards before, and after, transport.

The possibility of disease

You need to consider what they may pick up. Consider jetting, drenching, lice treating and vaccinating before they go. This can make life a lot happier for the person who has to look after them, particularly important if you are relying on someone else to do it.

Quarantine the sheep on return

It is cheaper to prevent disease and weed introduction than to spend time and money fixing the problem once it is established. Drench all sheep returning from agistment with a ML (Macrocyclic Lactone) type drench to prevent the introduction of resistant worms. Keep the sheep isolated for 3 to 4 months in a well fenced "quarantine" paddock. Check and treat for lice, or seed in their fleece, if necessary.

Legal aspects

While most agistment agreements are verbal, and often arranged by an agent, there are legal considerations.

The common agreement is that the land owner's obligations are limited to observing the stock and letting the stock owner know if there are any problems – the stock owner is responsible for any animal treatment. This may not be the best arrangement because the owner is often a long way from the stock and it costs him much more to tend to the stock. Also, a land owner who takes on agistment assumes certain legal responsibilities and cannot be negligent of the stock. **See Agistment agreement on the next page.**

