

CONTROL OF RAGWORT BY WILTSHIRE HORN SHEEP

A.R. Harradine
 Department of Agriculture, St Johns Avenue
 New Town Tasmania 7008

Abstract. Ragwort, *Senecio jacobaea*, is a serious weed of pastures in Tasmania, being poisonous to all types of livestock and competing strongly with desirable pasture species, thus reducing pasture productivity. Ragwort is not acutely toxic to sheep, and sheep grazing is one method used for controlling the weed, especially for preventing seed production.

In several areas of Tasmania, for example the Huon Valley, where sheep farming is not normally undertaken, ragwort often grows unchecked and is spreading rapidly. In these areas chemical control is not always feasible due to the topography and nature of the infestations. These areas are usually grazed only by cattle, which by their selective avoidance of ragwort and propensity for soil disturbance during winter exacerbate the problem. It is not practicable to introduce normal wool-producing sheep into these areas because of a lack of facilities and expertise for sheep handling, as well as the unfavourable climate for wool production.

In a trial commencing in December, 1985, at Cradoc in the Huon Valley, Wiltshire Horn sheep have been evaluated for control of ragwort. The Wiltshire Horn is one of the world's oldest surviving sheep breeds. The first breeding stock was imported into Australia from Britain in 1952 and several small flocks, all descendants of this one importation, are now present in Victoria and Tasmania. These sheep have several characteristics which make them ideal for ragwort control in these high rainfall cattle areas:

- * they graze ragwort in a similar manner to other sheep breeds, preventing flowering and seed production in grazed plants (1)
- * they shed their fleeces naturally each spring so that shearing, crutching, mulesing and, in most years, flystrike treatment are not necessary (1, 2)
- * they are reputedly resistant to footrot (2)
- * they produce high quality lean meat (3)
- * lambing percentages above 150% are normal from established Wiltshire Horn flocks in Britain, (C. Brunswick-Hullock, pers. comm., 1986) and lambs have rapid growth rates (2).

The introduction of such a low-maintenance, foraging sheep into ragwort infested cattle country would have significance for the pastoral industry in terms of weed control. The ability of these same sheep to increase product diversification through high quality sheep meat production would be a significant additional benefit.

Plans are currently being made to increase the numbers of Wiltshire Horn sheep in Tasmania so that they are readily available to landholders in areas where they offer the most appropriate method of control of ragwort.

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