Brief Communication

SOME ASPECTS OF SHEEP GROUP BREEDING SCHEMES IN NEW ZEALAND

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The group breeding scheme is a relatively new concept in animal breeding. It is a co-operative enterprise where farmers identify high performance ewes in their flocks for contribution to a nucleus where they are farmed, recorded and mated in a common environment. The resultant ram progeny are exchanged at an agreed rate for contributed ewes. Surplus rams are sold outside the group.

The data presented were gathered from a survey of contributors to schemes. All schemes were contacted and replies to questionnaires were received from 75% of contributors.

The survey showed that 26 breeding schemes mated ewes in the nucleus in 1972. Of these schemes 7 were located in the South Island and 19 in the North Island. Hatcher described 28 schemes in 1971, 2 of which have subsequently been disbanded owing to lack of enthusiasm, and four of which were not group breeding schemes as defined.

There were 262 contributors to schemes, and a total of 768 300 ewes were screened for contribution to the various nucleus flocks.

All major breeds of sheep with the exception of the Merino were being developed with group breeding. There were 11 Romney groups (presenting 68% of all ewes screened), 7 Perendale, 6 Coopworth and 1 group each of the Border Leicester and Corriedale breeds.

Eleven schemes had commercial sheep only, eight had studs only and six schemes accepted both commercial and stud sheep. Over 80% of all ewes screened were commercial.

As breeding schemes are co-operative and have a considerable potential for profit earning, it follows that, if their organization should fail, the schemes also will fail. Before the first rams are distributed, therefore, some type of formal organization is necessary. The types of organization used ranged from gentlemen's agreements, which do little to protect members, to private companies.

The recommendation of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is for registration under the Industrial and Provident Society Act 1908. This Act lends flexibility to schemes, which

is important especially in the early exploratory years of their evolution.

The structure of the nucleus flocks appears to be such that genetic gain is likely to be maximized.

The rate of dissemination of superior genetic material to contributor's flocks, however, can be increased by changes in breeding policy by which rams are used for one or two years, and female replacements are selected with a greater emphasis on measurable productive traits.

The writers consider the future of group breeding schemes in the sheep industry is bright and that the only impediment to their development will be caused by human relations and organizational problems, rather than genetic considerations.