

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

Moffitts Farm Wiltipoll Lawn-mowing Sheep

Health

Can they get foot-rot, worms, and other diseases?

All sheep are susceptible to internal parasites (worms), foot-rot and a range of bacterial diseases like pulpy kidney. However, as animals grow older they usually develop a degree of immunity to worms. Most importantly a constant, even plane of nutrition year round helps sheep to maintain their immunity. This is best met with productive pastures that never are grazed below ankle height. When pasture growth declines in winter and summer/autumn, and ankle height feed is not available, then supplementary feeding with high quality lucerne hay and sheep pellets is necessary every couple of days. To prevent sheep being contaminated with worms (the eggs are passed in faeces each day) it is important to rotationally graze the animals and rest each paddock for at least six weeks (longer if possible).

Foot-rot is a serious bacterial disease of the hoof and is not present on Moffitts Farm. However, sheep from other sources may carry the disease onto any property and visitors from sheep farms can carry the disease in dirt on their boots. If there have been no sheep on your property for at least 12 months, then foot-rot is unlikely to be an issue.

As for other bacterial diseases like pulpy kidney and tetanus, all Moffitts lambs have been double vaccinated against them using what is called a 'six in 1' vaccine. Annual boosters are generally not needed for wethers but can be given as a precaution.

Clean water from a trough should always be in the wether paddock. Dams and creeks are not ideal for sheep. Dams are often boggy around the edges and sheep do not like to walk in muddy soil. Creek water can be fine provided it's not salty but creek edges can harbor the snail associated with liver fluke which can cause disease in sheep. Without the snail the liver flukes life cycle cannot be completed. By providing water in troughs the issue of liver fluke disease is eliminated.

One of the most innocent health problems humans can cause sheep (and other ruminants – animals with four stomachs of which the biggest is the rumen) is to give them "exotic" food on an intermittent basis. A typical example may be to give your wethers a loaf of bread which has gone stale. Sheep like bread and will readily eat it, but give them too much at one time and they eat it all then the rumen is hit with a new form of carbohydrate which must be digested. A particular species of bacteria which breaks down this carbohydrate quickly multiplies and releases different acids to what was previously in the rumen and gut, this acid makes the animal ill and could even kill it. This disease is called acidosis. The same chain of events can happen by feeding to many old biscuits, cereal grains and possibly green lawn clippings during a dry summer. Your wether's rumen relies on an even plane of nutrition without any quick and large changes to its content.

Can they get flyblown?

It is unlikely that they will get fly blown because of their short coats. Wiltipolls start shedding their winter wool coats in October and this can last through to February. Most sheep have 90% of their

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

wool shed by early December. Some animals hold onto wool in patches on their back and there is always a chance that if these sheep are thoroughly wet, say in a December thunderstorm and conditions remain warm and humid then flystrike could occur. There is a simple solution, comb off the wool by December. If a strike does occur it can be controlled with the certified organic wound and flystrike treatment called Exstinosad. It's good to have in the first aid kit to treat any animal cuts or abrasions.

How can I tell if they are sick?

If sheep are fed well, protected from the weather with shelter and shade, then it is unlikely you will ever see them sick. If worms are causing a problem the animals will scour (diarrhea) usually indicated by faecal stain around the tail. Sheep poo should be of firm consistency, presented as a large stool or a pelleted stool. A sick sheep will often separate itself from the flock. Loss of weight can be a sign of illness.

What kills sheep (disease or predator)?

If sheep are fed well and protected from the weather and predators (including family dogs) then they can live for 10 to 12 years. Moffitts Farm has had one sheep live until 16 years of age. There is always a chance of sudden death with no apparent cause, that's because an enormous range of organisms exist in the animal's rumen (stomach) and intestine. If any of these turn "feral" then it may kill the animal.

Remember that sheep have no upper incisor teeth, just lower front teeth. As the animal reaches six to eight years of age, the lower jaw incisor teeth become loose and start to drop out. When only two or three of the front teeth are left and they are loose the animal has difficulty eating grass – these teeth can be pulled out by your vet. The sheep can still chew with their molars and gums. Providing the animals have plenty of easy to eat pasture then they can graze to maintain weight. However in dry times some supplementary feed like sheep pellets, or small amounts of bread can be given to help them maintain condition.

If your wether doesn't die peacefully of natural causes, there may come a time when its old age means it has difficulty eating, walking and finding water. At this point it is kinder to have your vet euthanise the animal.

Wool

How do I keep their wool short?

The Wiltipoll is a short wool sheep and it sheds its coat each spring and summer. So after shedding the new wool only grows slowly and reaches about 3 – 4cm long by the next spring. This means no shearing is needed.

Be aware that some people might tell you that your sheep have lice, if they see patches of wool left on gates and fences. Although Wiltipolls can get lice, it would not be the reason that they are shedding their wool, it is a natural process for these sheep.

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

Can I use or sell their wool?

The wool has no commercial value. It has short lengths and contains hair so is unlikely to be of much use for home crafts either. The wool will come off in patches over a period of a few months and be left around your property. Remember wool is mainly carbon and eventually biodegrades into the soil. At Moffitts Farm we note many bird species use the wool to line their nests.

Quantity

Numbers of animals to run depends mostly on the quality of pasture available throughout the entire year considering the fact that pasture is usually limiting in late autumn winter and during a dry summer.

How many do I need for 1 hectare (2 acres)? 2 – 4 depending on pasture quality

How many do I need for 4 hectares (10 acres)? 8 – 16 depending on pasture quality

Infrastructure

What sort of sheds, fencing and water points do I need?

At Moffitts Farm we recommend a sheep paddock is sub-divided so the animals can be rotated onto fresh pasture at least every two weeks, and each paddock is rested from grazing for at least 10 weeks before re-grazing. To do this setting up a paddock with a central water point and possibly a shed makes moving simple and quick. It is also possible to have a moveable water trough.

The most convenient fencing for sheep is prefabricated wire (sheep and lamb style). But if sheep are running with horses, a conventional six wire fence with plenty of droppers between posts is more suitable. If cattle are involved then an electric outrigger is helpful to keep them from leaning on the fence. Sheep can be contained in an electric wire and we use these at Moffitts Farm, but it is generally safer on small properties to use more conventional fencing.

How do they get delivered or taken away?

Your wethers can be transported in any high sided trailer providing there is a ramp for them to run up into the trailer.

Can I chain them up rather than fence them in?

Chaining is dangerous as the animal can take fright, run to the end of the chain and possibly break its neck. If confinement is needed then portable sheep panels should be used to make temporary yards.

What sort of shelter do they need?

Shade and shelter are needed for animal welfare. These are usually provided by trees and shrubs in corridors surrounding the sheep paddocks. Alternatively, small sheds or roof covers can be constructed.

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

Lawn-mowing

How well do they work (do they keep the lawn trim)?

Sheep will keep pastures reasonably trim but because pastures species vary in palatability and growth pattern during the year they are not grazed uniformly. Over grazing pasture to ensure everything is eaten is detrimental to your sheep's health and the pasture's health. Sheep as lawnmowers is a symbiotic relationship between the owners, the sheep, the pasture and the environment – all gain by maintaining a balance.

What about the waste they leave behind?

Sheep manure is an excellent fertiliser and breaks down naturally with the time depending on soil moisture content and temperature. If a pasture is growing on soil that has a recommended nutrient and pH (acidity) profile, then the nutrient released in the manure will maintain pasture growth year in year out. There should be no need for added fertiliser and there are no exports of nutrients off the paddocks. It is a self-replacing nutrient system.

Will I have enough grass all year around?

If the number of wethers purchased suits the pasture type and annual rainfall pattern, then with a regular rotation system enough pasture will grow to maintain the animals in good condition. In an extremely dry spring – summer – autumn some supplementary feed like sheep pellets or lucerne hay may be needed.

Will they eat my garden plants or trees?

Sheep like most garden plants so they need to be kept separate. Garden plants can also cause acidosis if they gain sudden access to them. They may also eat the bark of some shrubs and trees which will kill the plants. It may be possible to run these sheep under orchard trees, but owners will need to monitor the trees daily to ensure ringbarking has started.

Will some plants be poisonous to them?

Sheep will generally not eat a poisonous plant many of which are classified as weeds e.g. Pattersons curse. However, they may eat some poisonous plants if hungry.

Do they need food supplements?

May be needed during a dry spring- summer –autumn as happened in 2002, 2006, 2009 and 2012.

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

Sheep

What breeds?

Wiltipoll, Dorper and Damara pure breeds are all shedding breeds. Caution needs to be taken with crossbreeds especially first and second crosses as their ability to shed wool is limited. This means the owner may still have to organize an annual crutching and shearing.

Are goats better?

It's a personal preference. What is critical is the owner likes and enjoys interacting with the livestock purchased. Goats seem to require more secure fencing than sheep. Goats tend to browse more than sheep so if a property has some weedy species present such as gorse and blackberry goats will graze them as well as pasture. It is erroneous to think goats don't need pasture to survive, the relationship between the animals, the pasture and the environment is just as important with goats and it is with sheep.

Do they smell?

Smell is a personal characteristic. We believe Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls have a pleasant sheepy smell.

Will they charge/butt me?

Sheep are generally cautious animals preferring to stay at arm's length. However, as they become pets, which is associated the amount of time spent with them and providing desirable food they become less inhibited around humans and are happy to be patted. If food is held to them they become more excited and can stand on feet and even paw your legs to reach it, for this reason little children should not hold food or buckets when in the same paddock as they could easily be stood on or knocked over as the animal attempts to reach the food. Little children will be fine in a paddock with sheep if they are not holding food, and can get much enjoyment from watching sheep and petting friendly individuals. Wethers are not known to charge or butt.

Do they need to be rotated through different paddocks?

At Moffitts Farm we believe this is essential to maintain sheep health, pasture health and pasture environmental integrity

Can I breed from them?

No

Can I have sheep if I have dogs?

Yes, providing the dogs can always be controlled when with sheep, and providing dogs cannot access the sheep paddocks unsupervised.

Moffitts Farm Wiltipolls FAQ

Do I need a permit for sheep?

As far as we know in rural areas there is no permit required for sheep. In urban areas sheep may be precluded by your local council's bylaws.

Environment

Are sheep more environmentally friendly than a lawn mower?

Grazing sheep on pasture stimulates pasture growth which in turn takes up CO₂ from the air and converts it into leaves which the sheep eats. It also turns CO₂ into carbohydrates which are exuded from the pasture plant roots which micro-organisms use for energy in return for supplying nutrients to the plant. Some of the plant organic matter eventually becomes humus which is a long lived component of organic matter. So with ruminant animals, like sheep, grazing pasture is part of an important CO₂, carbon and soil food web ecosystem which is likely to be carbon neutral. Sheep are ruminants which means the bugs in the rumen release methane as a product of plant digestion and this is burped out. At Moffitts Farm we contend that the rumen methane is offset by increased plant growth stimulated by grazing management of perennial pastures and the subsequent return of organic matter back into the soil. Carbon is also returned directly into the soil ecosystem from the shed wool. In contrast, the lawn mower burns fossil fuel to do its noisy work. On the positive side it returns plant organic matter to the soil and plants are stimulated to regrow taking in CO₂. There are plenty of other considerations involved in the comparison. Essentially sheep will reduce the need to use a mower as often and can provide a great range of other benefits.

Want to learn more?

Moffitts Farm offers a three hour introductory sheep grazing seminar and farm walk, teaching how to set up a rotational grazing system that precludes the need to cut hay in spring and feed out later in the year. We call the system 'comfortable grazing' and training sessions can be arranged by appointment.

Visit our website to learn more about our sheep, and how you can purchase some:

www.moffittsfarm.com.au