



Ministry of Agriculture and Food

USE SHEEP BEHAVIOUR TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

A. O'Brien

INTRODUCTION

Producers who understand sheep behaviour can use this knowledge to their advantage in all aspects of sheep production and management. Whether setting up and using handling and shearing facilities, moving the flock to a new pasture, or catching an individual sheep, taking their behaviour into account ensures the job is completed in an efficient, low-stress manner.

Some important aspects of sheep behaviour as it relates to handling and movement include:

- Sheep do not like to be enclosed in a tight environment and will move on their own accord into larger areas.
- Sheep move toward other sheep willingly.
- Sheep move away from workers and dogs.
- Sheep have good long-term memory (relative) especially with respect to unpleasant experiences.
- If given a choice, sheep prefer to move over flat areas rather than up an incline, and up an incline rather than moving down it.
- Sheep prefer to move from a darkened area towards a lighter area, but avoid contrasts in light.
- Sheep flow better through facilities if the same paths and flow directions are used every time.
- Stationary sheep are motivated to move by the sight of sheep running (away).
- Sheep will balk or stop forward movement when they see sheep moving in the opposite direction.
- Sheep will move faster through a long, narrow pen or area than through a square pen.
- Sheep move better through the handling chute (race) if they cannot see the operator.
- Sheep will more willingly move toward an open area than toward what they perceive as a dead end.
- Very young lambs that become separated from their dams will want to return to the area where they first became separated.
- Sheep react negatively (as do all livestock) to loud noises, yelling and barking.
- Young sheep move through facilities easier when their first move through is with well-trained older sheep.

Many years of observation by people who work with sheep under a wide range of conditions have gone into establishing the above-listed points of sheep behaviour. They illustrate that certain actions and reactions by sheep are very predictable, and can be used to the producer's advantage in all aspects of sheep management. Those producers who incorporate aspects of sheep behaviour into management of their flock will see positive results in the ease of moving groups, willingness of sheep to enter and be processed in handling facilities, and fewer stress indicators in the animals and handlers.

This Factsheet was written by **Anita O'Brien**, Sheep and Goat Specialist, OMAF, Kemptville.

Agricultural Information Contact Centre
1-877-424-1300
ag.info@omaf.gov.on.ca

www.gov.on.ca/omaf

POD
ISSN 1198-712X
Également disponible en français
(commande n° 02-060)

