



LAMB CROP 2023

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About this report

The Lamb Crop Report estimates total lamb numbers for the current season. B+LNZ's lamb crop survey data is available one year earlier than information on lambing from Statistics New Zealand. The results presented here are used to measure breeding ewe performance (lambing percentage), the number of lambs born and lamb survival, and provide an outlook for supply expectations for the season. Lamb crop estimates in this report are used throughout the sector to inform both farmers and the market, including analysts and commentators, exporters, and various service organisations.

This report builds on production region estimates and is underpinned by the Sheep and Beef Farm Survey. The Survey covers over 500 commercial sheep and beef farms, which are a statistically representative sample of the commercial sheep and beef farms in New Zealand.

The B+LNZ Economic and Farm Insights team analyses export and statistical data regularly and surveys sheep and beef farmers throughout the year. In March 2024, B+LNZ will release an updated market and farm profitability forecast in the Mid-Season Update publication.



Executive Summary

Overview

In 2023 the number of lambs tailed in spring is expected to increase by 2.6 per cent or 526,000 head to 20.9 million head. The increase is due to better lambing percentages that has offset the slight decrease in breeding ewes this year.

Conditions were favourable in autumn during mating for the nation's ewe breeding flock and a relatively warm winter and good feed levels helped maintain ewe body condition. Weather and feed conditions were also generally good during peak lambing times.

With expected El Niño conditions over summer and falling prime lamb prices, farmer intentions were for more lambs to be sent to processors pre-Christmas than normal. Lamb processing in the first quarter will depend, however, on farmers' ability to grow lambs to a sufficient size to market specifications, and processing capacity. Lambs were growing well in most of the South Island, but not as fast in the North Island.

Farmer morale is low, impacted by low farmgate prices particularly for adult sheep, high farm expenses and debt servicing, but there is a cautious optimism for change to farm regulations with a change in government.

Ewes to Ram -0.9%

The number of breeding ewes at 1 July 2023 decreased (-0.9%) on 2022 to 15.3 million head. Numbers in both the North and South Islands decreased, by 1.2 per cent and 0.7 per cent respectively.

Lambing Percentage 129.9%

The average ewe lambing percentage for spring 2023 was 129.9 per cent, an increase of 4.8 percentage points on 2022.

Lamb Crop +2.6%

The number of lambs tailed in spring 2023 is estimated to increase moderately - by 2.6 per cent or 526,000 head to 20.9 million head. More lambs tailed this season is in contrast to a longer trend of fewer lambs in line with a decline in breeding ewes.

Key 2023-24 Numbers

 Lamb crop 20.9 million head	 Breeding ewes 15.3 million head
 Total flock size 25.5 million head	 Lamb processing 17.6 million head
 Lambing percentage 129.9%	 Ewe processing 3.2 million head

Increased lambs for spring 2023 is partly the result of a stabilised breeding ewe flock this year and favourable tupping and lambing conditions.

Although more ewe hoggets were mated, the number of lambs from ewe hoggets decreases nationally (-3.0%).

Export Lamb Processing -0.3%

The number of lambs processed in 2023-24 is estimated to remain almost static (-0.3%) on the previous season at 17.6 million head. Farmers plan to draft more deeply in the first quarter, if they are able to, and send more lambs to market, the success of farmer expectations will depend on weights and processor capacity.

Export Adult Sheep Processing -1.8%

The number of adult sheep processed is estimated to decline 1.8 per cent to 3.2 million head in 2023-24.

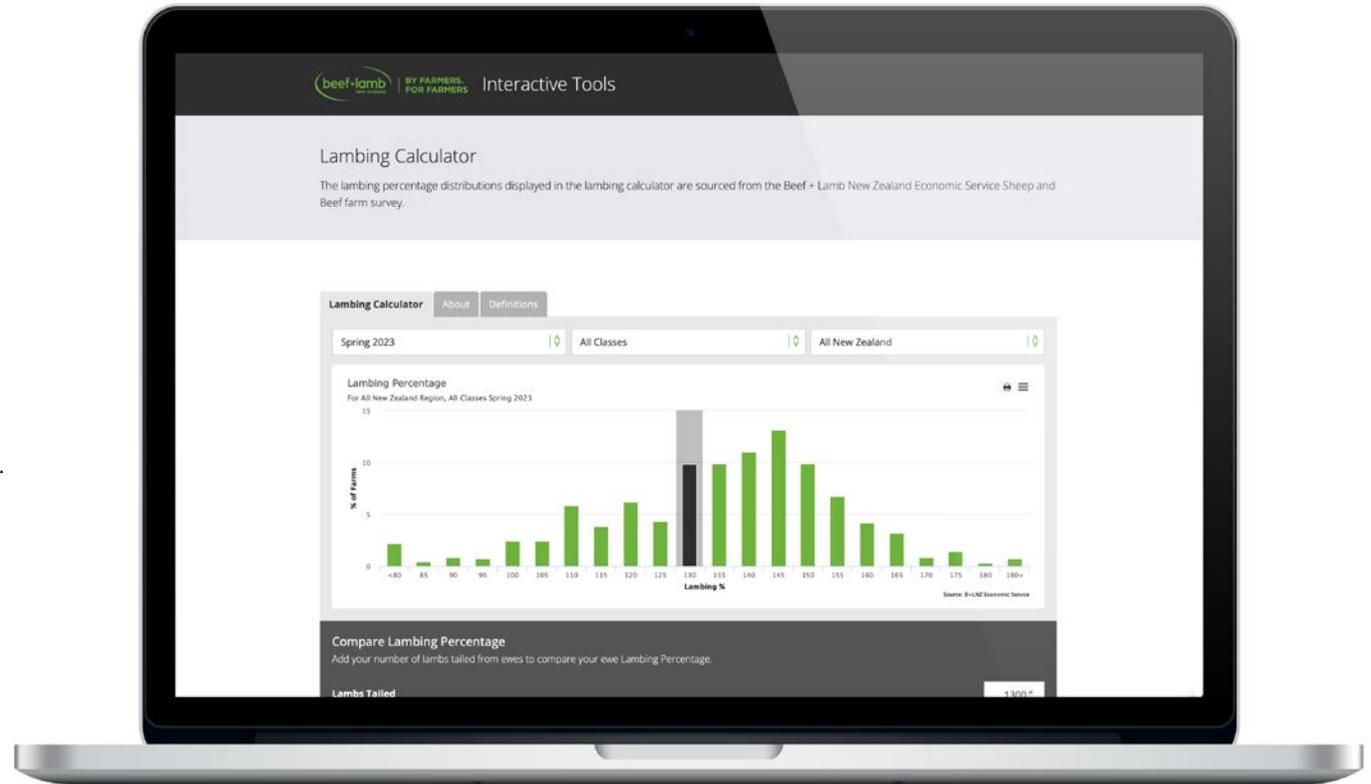
Compare Your Lambing Percentage Online

Data collection and benchmarking are key drivers of improved farm profitability. See how your farm business compares using the B+LNZ Lambing Calculator.

The Lambing Calculator puts your farm's performance in context. Use it for a clear understanding of where your farm stands among others within your farm class and region and get an estimate of potential revenue gains from an increased lambing percentage.

Once you know where your farm sits, you will be better placed to take appropriate action if required and desired.

Visit <https://tools.beeflambnz.com/lambing-calculator>





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New Zealand overview

Ewes to Ram -0.9%

The number of breeding ewes at 1 July 2023 decreased (-0.9%) on 2022 to 15.3 million head. Numbers in the North and South Islands decreased, by 1.2 per cent and 0.7 per cent respectively.

Lambing Percentage 129.9%

The average ewe lambing percentage for spring 2023 was an estimated 129.9 per cent, 4.8 percentage points higher than in 2022. Favourable conditions and plentiful feed for much of the country in autumn 2023 allowed breeding ewes to be in good condition confirmed by pregnancy scanning results being better than average.

Hoggets to Ram +5.5%

In autumn 2023, more ewe hoggets (+5.5%) were put to the ram than in autumn 2022, reflecting good ewe hogget growth rates and feed conditions.

Total Lambs - Lamb Crop +2.6%

The number of lambs tailed in spring 2023 is estimated to increase by 2.6 per cent or 526,000 head to 20.9 million head. More lambs tailed this season is in contrast to a longer trend of fewer lambs in line with the decline in breeding ewes.

Although more ewe hoggets were mated, the number of lambs from ewe hoggets decreased nationally (-3.0%) with the influence of East Coast and Marlborough-Canterbury where lambing was not as successful for ewe hoggets as last year.

Unfortunately, with more multiple and twin births, farmers reported more bearings (vaginal prolapse) this spring and ewe deaths.

Conditions at lambing

Weather conditions were favourable for much of the country, particularly the North Island, which helped during lambing. Feed was variable throughout regions, see Region Reports for more detail, but overall early spring feed levels were tight for many and improved in November with warmer temperatures and rainfall.

Farmers reported good survival rates for lambs through much of New Zealand. Not all escaped climatic events impacting lambing though. Some exposed hill country farms in Marlborough-Canterbury suffered from storms. And for the southern South Island, there were a few ill timed snowstorms and flood events. Thankfully advanced warnings allowed farmers to move stock out of harm's way.

Lamb Growth Rates (aka thrift)

Farmer reports of lamb growth were less positive for the North Island with average or below average growth. Lambs were growing well in northern and central South Island with good pasture growth, clover, and warming temperatures. Southland farmers were not as optimistic about lamb growth rates.

Early Drafting Intentions in First Quarter

North Island - down, South Island - up

Farmers expect to market lambs earlier than usual due to El Niño conditions and falling livestock prices.

Farmer intentions for drafting in the first quarter of the season were around 51,000 more lambs for processing pre-Christmas.

Expectations were that lambs may be at lower carcase weights than usual, but the prospect of dry weather and feed pressure is motivation to sell earlier, including on the store market if necessary. Southland farmers were the exception, they consider fewer lambs will be ready for processing in the first quarter. In late November, lamb growth rates were potentially an obstacle in reaching prime lamb specifications (particularly for the North Island).

Numbers drafted pre-Christmas is likely to be determined by available processing capacity and ability to meet lamb specifications rather than farmer intentions.

2023-24 Lamb Crop estimate

	(000)			Percentage change from 2022-23		
	North Island	South Island	NZ	North Island	South Island	NZ
Ewes to Ram	7,326	8,009	15,335	-1.2%	-0.7%	-0.9%
Lambs from Ewes	9,924	10,003	19,927	+5.2%	+0.7%	+2.9%
Ewe Lambing %	135.5%	124.9%	129.9%	+8.2%	+1.7%	+4.7%
Lambs from Hoggets	477	507	984	-4.6%	-1.7%	-3.1%
Total Lambs Tailed	10,401	10,510	20,911	+4.7%	+0.6%	+2.6%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

Comment on Early Processing Price

Published processor prices were significantly lower than 12 months earlier and expectations were for decreasing prices towards Christmas. In November, published processor prices were around \$6.40/kgCW in the North Island, down over \$2/kgCW (-25%) from November 2022. In the South Island, published lamb prices were also around one-quarter lower than in 2022 at \$6.00-6.10/kgCW in mid-November.

Lower published prime lamb prices put downward pressure on the store market and the outlook is pessimistic.

General Comment

There were several key themes reported by farmers across New Zealand.

- Farmer morale was generally average to low as poor returns and high expenses (including high interest rates) place significant financial pressure on farm profitability and cashflow this season. An increased lamb crop goes some way to offsetting the gloom with more livestock to sell.
- Morale around environmental regulations remained low as farmers waited to see what a change of government might do in terms of scope, pace, and timing of new regulations. Some farmers however had a renewed sense of optimism for a decrease in farm regulation moving forward.
- An El Niño climate phase has farmers preparing for a dry summer and autumn and concerned for potential feed shortages. For much of the country, El Niño typically signifies strong and drying north-westerly winds and prolonged dry spells. The east of the country will likely see lower than average rainfall. El Niño is a key driver in plans to draft lambs earlier than usual.
- Securing processor space for lambs and cull ewes was a notable concern from farmers, particularly with plans to draft earlier than usual and the likelihood of impending dry conditions. Holding ewes for longer over summer increases feed demand, which would compromise lamb growth and limit ewe mating weights in autumn.
- The rate of conversion of sheep and beef farms into forestry (particularly pine trees) appeared to slow although changes to the landscape were apparent for farmers and communities. Land already purchased for forestry conversion will continue to be planted in trees over the next two to three years as seedling stock becomes available, reducing livestock numbers.



Lamb Processing 2023-24

First Quarter-Oct-Dec

Overall, the number of lambs processed during the first quarter of the 2023-24 season – from October to December – is expected to total 4.5 million head, an increase of 1.1 per cent on 2022-23.

It is estimated that 25.6 per cent of the season's total export lamb processing will occur in the first quarter, slightly higher than last year and driven by concerns about El Niño conditions for summer and falling published processing prices.

Meat processing capacity will be a constraint to the intentions expressed by farmers during this lamb crop survey. A further constraint or limitation to farmer expectations is lambs meeting appropriate weights. Farmers in many regions anticipate slightly lower weights than last spring, if weights are too low then it will not be worth sending lambs to market early.

In the North Island, processing in the first quarter is estimated to decrease 2.1 per cent, or 46,000 lambs, on 2022-23 to 2.1 million head.

In the South Island, processing in the first quarter is estimated to increase 4.2 per cent, or 97,000 lambs, to 2.4 million head.

Full Season Outlook

Export lamb processing -0.3%

The number of lambs processed is estimated to decrease marginally (-0.3 %) from 17.7 million head in 2022-23 to 17.6 million for 2023-24.

North Island -1.9%

In the North Island, the number of lambs processed is estimated to decrease 1.9 per cent (162,000 head) to 8.4 million head.

South Island +1.2%

In the South Island, the number of lambs processed is estimated to increase 1.2 per cent (109,000 head) to 9.2 million head.

Carcase weights -0.9%

The average carcase weight of lambs processed is expected to decrease slightly (-0.9%), from 19.40 kg per head in 2022-23 to 19.20 kg in 2023-24. If there is a prolonged El Niño drought weight could be lower than currently estimated.

Table 1 Export Lamb Processing Intentions for Oct-Dec

Export Lambs Processing Intentions						
	(000) Head			% of Total		
	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24e	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24e
Northland-Waikato-BoP	380	362	410	24.1%	22.2%	24.2%
East Coast	852	947	830	23.2%	26.3%	25.7%
Taranaki-Manawatū	841	851	875	24.5%	25.3%	24.9%
North Island	2,073	2,161	2,115	23.9%	25.1%	25.1%
Marlborough Canterbury	1,232	1,364	1,450	24.3%	27.2%	28.7%
Otago-Southland	912	932	943	22.8%	23.0%	22.8%
South Island	2,144	2,296	2,393	23.6%	25.3%	26.1%
New Zealand	4,217	4,457	4,508	23.7%	25.2%	25.6%

e = estimate

Source: Beef + Lamb New Zealand Economic and Farm Insights, Lamb Crop Survey

Export adult sheep processing -1.8%

The number of adult sheep processed in New Zealand is estimated to decline 1.8 per cent to 3.2 million in 2023-24.

Sensitivity

These estimates are sensitive to feed availability and prices offered by meat processors. If feed supplies tighten or price incentives are offered, the number of lambs processed early will tend to increase.

Region Reports

Northland-Waikato-Bay of Plenty

Ewes to Ram

Breeding ewes to ram declined slightly, by 0.6 per cent, to 1.9 million head. Feed conditions in summer and autumn were conducive to retaining capital stock and culling was lower than in recent years due to relatively low ewe prices.

Ewe Lambing Percentage

Ewe lambing percentage increased 14.6 percentage points to an estimated 135.9 per cent. The wet summer and autumn created an abundance of feed, in stark contrast to 2022-23's prolonged drought. Feed supplies allowed ewes to be at ideal weights for mating. Although facial eczema (FE) was present it was not pervasive. Across the Northern North Island, farmers rated ewe deaths higher than last spring, due to a significant lift in ewes with bearings.

Hoggets to Ram

The number of ewe hoggets mated increased 12.2 per cent as ideal growing conditions meant more ewe lambs reached target weights for mating. Around 40 per cent of ewe hoggets were put to the ram.

Total Number of Lambs

Total lambs increased 11.3 per cent to 2.7 million (+270,000 head). There was an increase in lamb survival due to a mix of factors – the condition of ewes at mating, more ewes with multiple lambs, more lambs from hoggets, and good spring weather and feed levels.

The number of lambs from hoggets increased 12.4 per cent to 108,000 head, or 4.1 per cent of total lambs for the region.

Across the Northern North Island, the spread of lambing was reported as normal.

Conditions at Lambing

Lambing weather was kind across the region. The late frosts through Waikato and King Country did not affect lamb survival. There was an absence of cold, wet storms.

The feed situation for much of the Northern North Island was described as better than average by farmers, however there were pockets of light or limited feed. These areas include coastal parts of the Kaipara district, Auckland and parts of North Waikato and western King Country.

Farmers reported lamb survival was better than typical with good condition on ewes and feed supplies enabling ewes to milk well and support multiple lambs.

Northland-Waikato-BoP

	2023-24e	
	(000)	% change
Ewes to Ram	1,872	-0.6%
Lambs from Ewes	2,544	+11.3%
Ewe Lambing %	135.9%	+14.6%
Lambs from Hoggets	108	+12.5%
Total Lambs Tailed	2,652	+11.3%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

Lamb Growth Rates

Lamb thrift aligned with feed supply and was described as average or typical. However, some farmers commented that thrift was lower than average due to a lack of sunshine and the number of multiple lambs.

Early Drafting Intentions

Farmers expect to market their lambs earlier than usual due to El Niño conditions and falling processor prices. El Niño was at the forefront of farmers' minds across Northland, Coromandel, Bay of Plenty and some Waikato areas that have experienced significant drought conditions in the past under this climate pattern.

General Comment

Farmers were feeling positive after the general election with an expectation that the overwhelming pace of regulation experienced in the last six years might ease or slow down.

However, farming returns are expected to be weaker this season. Interest rates place significant pressure on farmers with debt, and input costs are elevated.

In November, good feed and pasture conditions provided some farmers with a degree of flexibility around selling and buying options. But there was caution as to the potential impact of El Niño.

The number of farms on the market this spring was lower than last year, with land use change to pine trees appearing to slow. However, recent blanket plantings of pine trees across sheep and beef land in the Northern North Island was very apparent when driving through the region and from farmers responding to B+LNZ's survey.

A positive this spring for farmers was the number of lambs produced, which helps buffer against the losses that farmers are expecting this financial year.

East Coast

Ewes to Ram

Breeding ewes decreased by 2.1 per cent to 3.6 million. Ewes put to the ram in autumn 2023 decreased across all farm classes, with the largest decline for Hard Hill country farms (-4.0%) and Finishing farms (-5.0%). Hill country breeding ewes dropped by 1.4 per cent.

Ewe Lambing Percentage

The average ewe lambing percentage increased 6.6 percentage points to 134.3%. The East Coast had favourable autumn conditions during mating, despite plenty of rain, and, with good feed levels, farmers were able to keep their ewes well fed. A kind spring for most led to a successful conversion of record high scanning percentages into lambs on ground at tailing, with more twins and multiples on farm this year.

Hoggets to Ram

The number of hoggets mated increased across all farm classes, and by 4.7 per cent (566,000 hoggets) overall compared to 2022. The proportion of ewe hoggets mated reflects good growing and feed conditions through to mating and falling processor prices in summer autumn as farmers held onto hoggets in the hope that prices would improve.

Total Number of Lambs

The total lamb crop for the East Coast is estimated at 5.0 million head, up 2.0 per cent. Farmers reported higher ewe deaths than last spring, due mainly to more bearings and some cases of leptospirosis. The number of dry ewes was similar to previous seasons.

Lambs from hoggets comprised an estimated 5.0 per cent of lambs docked (~240,000 lambs).

The spread of lambing was notably wider in northern parts of the East Coast where February's Cyclone Gabrielle had a large impact. For many farmers, the cyclone hit when teasers and rams were about to join ewes, disrupting the lambing pattern.

Conditions at lambing

Pockets of Tararua and Wairarapa experienced some wet windy days during lambing, which affected survival on farms that lamb slightly later. There were land slips in Gisborne as the ground remained wet from weather events and above average rainfall this year. Sodden ground had mostly dried in Hawke's Bay in time for lambing. Overall, there were no major weather events that harmed lambing on a regional scale.

Feed levels varied across the region with a 'late' spring close to lambing improving tight feed conditions. Cooler nights meant that spring growth did not eventuate as per usual. Flatter country in Hawke's Bay had good levels of feed in November, however southern areas in Wairarapa reported tight feed especially on hill country. Farmers in Gisborne reported mixed feed levels.

East Coast

	2023-24e	
	(000)	% change
Ewes to Ram	3,551	-2.1%
Lambs from Ewes	4,769	+3.0%
Ewe Lambing %	134.3%	+6.6%
Lambs from Hoggets	240	-13.7%
Total Lambs Tailed	5,009	+2.0%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

Farmers reported "better" or "excellent" lamb survival when compared to average, an indication of a kinder spring than last year when rain and snowstorms hit during peak lambing for some parts. Multiple births were managed by ewes in good condition.

Lamb Growth Rates

Lamb growth was similar to last spring and lower than long term averages. Less sunshine hours and cooler days were attributed to slower lamb growth. In early December, lambs were putting on weight and feed was plentiful with rain and warm temperatures.

Early Drafting Intentions

Farmers will likely market fewer lambs pre-Christmas than last year. Feed had been tight earlier in spring for some areas, however late-November and early December saw feed levels increase for many farms enabling lambs to be kept on farm longer till they reach market specifications.

General Comment

Farmer sentiment was mixed on the East Coast with many farms still facing significant cyclone recovery work, poor economic returns expected, and high farm expenses. Farmers who have weathered economic downturns in the past although well versed in what they can do on farm to cope, are challenged this season with a collision of prices, expenses and regulations. Those farms with high debt levels were feeling the pressure of increased interest rates and debt servicing and were trying to find ways to increase off-farm income.

Farmers throughout the East Coast were pleasantly surprised by the numbers of lambs tailed. After a tough summer and autumn for many parts of the region after adverse weather events, the performance of breeding ewes was encouraging.

Cropping operations were more successful this spring than last with favourable weather conditions. Crops will support feed supply through summer with increased lambs on board.

Taranaki-Manawatū

Ewes to Ram

Estimated breeding ewes remained steady at 1.9 million head. The ewe flock has remained stable at around 1.9 million head for the past four seasons.

Breeding ewes on Finishing farms (Farm Class 5) declined slightly, in contrast to an increase in numbers on Hard Hill Country (Farm Class 3). This same pattern was observed last season.

Ewe Lambing Percentage

The average ewe lambing percentage increased to a record 137.2 per cent in 2023, up 4.9 percentage points compared with 2022. All farm classes reported an increase in lambing with Finishing farms ahead of the rest.

Hoggets to Ram

The number of ewe hoggets mated this season was similar to last year. Excellent autumn pasture growth helped farmer decision making to mate ewe hoggets.

Total Number of Lambs

The total lamb crop for the region is estimated to be 2.7 million head, around 100,000 head more than last year. Excellent ewe condition at mating in autumn 2023 resulted in better-than-average results when pregnancy scanning was done in winter. Record lambing results were due to excellent ewe condition at mating coupled with excellent lamb survival during spring. More triplets this spring presented a management challenge for some farmers.

Ewe deaths across winter and early spring increased compared to last year. Bearings were a challenge, with higher body condition, twins and multiples contributing factors.

Lambs from ewe hoggets were estimated at 4.7 per cent of the total lamb crop or 130,000 head, similar to last year.

No significant change in lambing date was reported with spread of lambing being consistent with previous seasons.

Conditions at Lambing

Weather conditions during lambing were favourable, however, several cold fronts swept across the region with a minor impact to overall lambs born. More frosts were reported this winter and early spring compared to 2022.

A significant increase in rainfall through northern Rangitikei and Upper Wanganui caused excess soil moisture levels. High winds during September and October dried and hardened paddocks, which helped with late lambing and early tailing conditions.

In early November, farmers assessed feed levels as below average however as November progressed the situation improved due to steady rain and warming temperatures. Summer forage crops were planted through November and these crops

Taranaki-Manawatū

	2023-24e	
	(000)	% change
Ewes to Ram	1,903	+0.1%
Lambs from Ewes	2,611	+3.8%
Ewe Lambing %	137.2%	+4.9%
Lambs from Hoggets	130	+3.2%
Total Lambs Tailed	2,741	+3.8%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

will help finish lambs through summer. Unfortunately, slug damage to summer brassica crops was widespread in November.

All farm classes reported a vast improvement in lamb survival. This was due to generally good weather conditions during lambing.

Lamb Growth Rates

Across all farm classes, farmers reported lamb growth was average. Warming weather conditions in late spring stimulated clover production and lambs are expected to respond to this quality feed heading into mid-December. Several farmers reported worm burdens and drench resistance may impact lamb growth rates this season. With the removal of Bionic capsules from use in New Zealand, for food safety (residue) reasons, some farmers will need to reassess their drench strategies.

Early Drafting Intentions

With declining prime lamb prices and a potentially drier-than-normal summer ahead, farmers were looking at all options to minimise the impacts of lower revenue and feed shortages. Early drafting plans with lower prime weights, utilising the store market, and summer forage cropping will all play a key role.

General Comment

Farmer sentiment was average. Given the poor returns facing the sector this season, farmer sentiment is likely to reduce. On-farm inflation has had a major impact on farm expenditure over the last two years and farmers expect profitability to be poor with low farmgate prices. A real sense of needing to hunker down and get through the next 8-12 months was apparent.

A small glimmer of hope appeared in the strong wool industry with prices higher in spring than in the last few seasons.

The changing political landscape gave farmers a sense of optimism for a decrease in farm regulation.

Marlborough-Canterbury

Ewes to Ram

Breeding ewes were estimated at 3.0 million, down 1.2 per cent on 2022. Ewes were lost to land use change, especially forestry and increased cattle farming, reflecting poor crossbred wool prices and pessimism about lamb price prospects.

Ewe Lambing Percentage

Lambing percentage from ewes was estimated at 127.4 per cent, up 1.2 percentage points on lambing 2022. Plentiful autumn feed boosted hopes for lambing results, but several factors tempered the outcome. Poor-quality, rank feed limited ewe response to additional feeding, so ewe condition and ovulation rates were only average.

Facial eczema in Nelson district reduced conception (fewer multiples and more barren ewes) and increased ewe deaths. Farms with better pregnancy scanning results faced increased risk of bearings, ewe deaths and metabolic disorders. Increased ewe deaths were widely reported, from Tasman and Marlborough in the north to Waimate and Waitaki districts in the south.

Hoggets to Ram

While the number of ewe hoggets mated increased (+1.9%), farmers appeared to put less emphasis on hogget mating weight and management. Additional feed and animal health requirements were not expected to deliver significant income given the price outlook, and hoggets with lambs at foot were seen as potential liabilities if El Niño weather patterns compromised pasture production in spring and early summer.

Total Number of Lambs

Total lamb crop is estimated at 4.0 million, down 1.2 per cent on last year.

Lambs from ewe hoggets were estimated at 198,500, down 17.0 per cent, and indicative of low ewe hogget lambing percentages (<75%) achieved on many farms.

Many farmers still do not run vasectomised 'teaser' rams with hoggets prior to mating, a management technique that encourages earlier ovulation and increased conception rates. Other factors compromising performance included low feed quality and abortion diseases in some flocks.

Lambing dates were similar to 2022 but less condensed on many Hill Country farms, possibly indicating animal health issues around mating.

Conditions at Lambing

Lambing weather was largely dry and settled for most of the region, but short-lived cold snaps brought snow and chilling winds at times, especially on the higher hills. Such weather negatively impacts the very youngest lambs but has limited effect on mortality once lambs are a few days old.

Marlborough-Canterbury

	2023-24e	
	(000)	% change
Ewes to Ram	3,022	-1.2%
Lambs from Ewes	3,850	-0.2%
Ewe Lambing %	127.4%	+1.2%
Lambs from Hoggets	199	-16.7%
Total Lambs Tailed	4,049	-1.2%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

Cool dry weather limited pasture production, especially in early spring, reducing ewe condition and hampering lamb growth. Feed levels were good in Nelson and North Canterbury, and normal in the south of the region. Feed levels were widely regarded as better than 2022, which featured a cold, dry October.

While many farmers commented on good to excellent lamb survival, results were notably different for exposed hill country farms from North to South Canterbury where the infrequent storms coincided with peak lambing. Early lambing lowland farms also had short term increases in lamb losses during early spring storms. Contagious abortion was a sporadic issue, severely limiting lamb output for a few individual farms.

Lamb Growth Rates

Farmer reports of lamb growth were positive. Lambs were doing especially well in Nelson, Marlborough (however slowing on hill country), central and North Canterbury. Those farmers without irrigation on the plains and downlands from Christchurch south mentioned feed supplies tightening as dry, cool conditions prevailed.

Early Drafting Intentions

There was a pronounced trend towards drafting more new season lambs than usual pre-Christmas across dryland farms as farmers considered risk of dry conditions under a developing El Niño scenario (i.e., most eastern districts from Marlborough to Waitaki). First drafts began in November and farmers were ready to wean and draft as many as possible, if regular rain stops. Farmers with irrigation and those who expected increased rainfall under El Niño conditions (e.g., Nelson area) were prepared to hold lambs to heavier weights if doing so was expected to be profitable.

General Comment

Difficulty securing processing space for cull ewes was a concern for farmers. Additional ewes over summer would increase feed demand, potentially compromising lamb growth but more likely limit ewe mating weight in autumn 2024. Every additional kilogram of ewe liveweight at mating represents around 2 percentage points of subsequent lamb output; ewes mated 3kg lighter than usual would thus be expected to take 6 percentage points off their 2024 lamb drop. This has ramifications for the 2024-25 lamb production season if ewe flocks continue to decline nationally.

Farmer morale remained low as they considered the impact of environmental regulations on their businesses and their advisers awaited indications from the new government of the scope and timing of policy implementation. Waitaki District farmers would be required to have certified Fresh Water Farm Plans (FWFP) by mid-2025 with no finalised Land and Water Plan from Otago Regional Council. With high input prices and low product returns, especially for red meat and strong wool, few farmers could afford to pay a professional to prepare their FWFP.

High interest rates and bank requirements for principal repayments continued to put pressure on farm input spending, especially fertiliser, repairs and maintenance, and equipment replacement. Several farmers or partners increased off-farm employment in the past 12 months to make ends meet.



Otago-Southland

Ewes to Ram

The number of breeding ewes mated decreased to 2.8 million (-0.4%) in Otago and to 2.2 million (-1.3%) in Southland. Farmers were quick to cull low-performing ewes in 2022-23 to reduce feed demand as they expected a third consecutive dry summer autumn period. Fewer replacement ewe hoggets were kept in 2021-22 leading to a reduction in the total ewe flock. Fortunately, rain in autumn 2023 allowed feed to recover and ewes were on a rising plane of nutrition going to the ram.

Ewe Lambing Percentage

In Otago, the average ewe lambing percentage increased 2.4 percentage points to 121.6 per cent, while in Southland it increased 1.4 percentage points to 125.6 per cent. Ewe lambing percentage increased in all farm classes except Breeding and Finishing farms (Farm Class 6) in Southland. Although High Country farms anticipated an increased lambing percentage, tailing had not started on many of these farms in early November.

Pregnancy scanning results were variable with a higher proportion of multiples reported for many, but greater variation in Clutha District and northern Southland with some farmers severely disappointed.

Hoggets to Ram

Timely rain in autumn allowed ewe lambs to grow well and a higher proportion were mated in Southland this year. Many farmers elected not to mate hoggets in autumn 2022 during dry conditions but a more typical pattern occurred this year. However, the total number of ewe hoggets in the region decreased with a continued trend towards arable farming, and cattle to a lesser extent.

Total Number of Lambs

The number of lambs born increased 2.4 per cent to 3.5 million in Otago, and 0.8 per cent to 2.9 million in Southland. Higher ewe lambing percentages and more lambs born to hoggets offset a decline in breeding ewes. An increase of around 107,000 lambs is forecast for Otago-Southland.

Lambs from hoggets were estimated at 170,000 for Otago (+2.0%) and 138,000 for Southland (+25.3%). Tailing of lambs born to hoggets had not been completed at the time of the survey so approximately one third of the returns were estimated results.

Farmers reported that lambing date was similar to 2022, but lambing was slightly more condensed with fewer ewes lambing in the second cycle. Over the last five years, the mean lambing date has gradually moved earlier. One driver was the desire to send cull ewes for processing prior to Christmas. This season some meat companies warned that capacity may be tight, and farmers should be prepared to hold ewes on farm well into the new year. Dry conditions would reduce pasture growth rates, further pressuring feed supply and triggering decisions to sell some livestock as stores.

Otago-Southland

2023-24e		
	(000)	% change
Ewes to Ram	4,987	-0.4%
Lambs from Ewes	6,153	+1.3%
Ewe Lambing %	123.4%	+2.0%
Lambs from Hoggets	308	+11.3%
Total Lambs Tailed	6,461	+1.7%

NB: Ewe Lambing change is percentage points on previous season

Conditions at Lambing

High rainfall in July and August led to wet and muddy conditions, which caused some ewes to lose condition on winter feed crops. Spring was generally favourable. Some Southland and West Otago catchments experienced flooding in September. Short sharp wintry blasts brought snow to parts of the region in September and October, but these were short-lived, and farmers had advanced warning so were able to move stock.

Pasture growth rates were near-normal on the Southland plains, but farmers noted the challenge of meeting feed demand after ewes were set stocked for lambing. In November, most farms had adequate to good feed levels.

Despite challenges, lamb survival was reported, or anticipated, to be better than usual across the whole region and all farm classes. There was an increase in the number of bearings in ewes this spring, which contributed to a higher loss of ewes, and lambs, on some farms.

Lamb Growth Rates

Farmers considered lambs were growing well, particularly in Otago. Pasture growth has been increasing across the region and timely rains in Otago were useful. Increasing air and soil temperatures encouraged clover growth. Southland farmers were not as optimistic about lamb growth rates.

Early Drafting Intentions

Otago farmers intend to send more lambs for processing before Christmas this year. In contrast, Southland farmers considered that fewer lambs would be ready for processing in the first quarter due to growth rates. These decisions will depend on the pasture growth curve through the season and prevailing processor prices. Most farmers plan to keep their usual schedule when deciding on timing of drafts.

General Comment

Farm profitability is under pressure with reduced revenue and increased costs. Increasing numbers of farms face negative cashflow situations, requiring increased borrowing to continue. This further compounds issues because interest rates have increased up to three-fold in the last two years and a few farms are critically exposed.

Farmer morale remains low with poor profitability compounding stresses from the plethora of new regulations introduced in recent years.

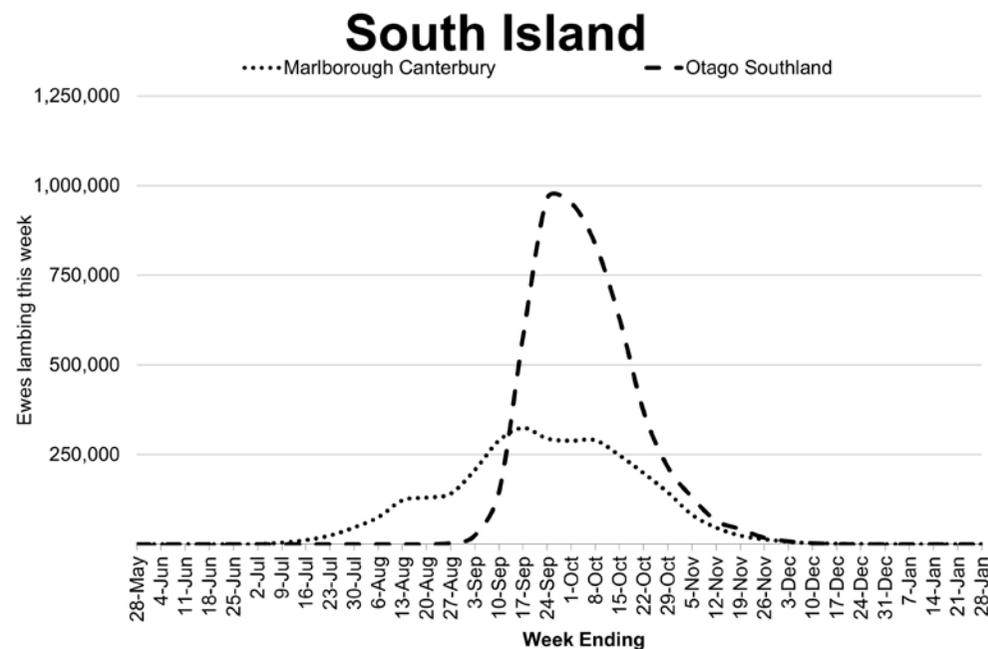
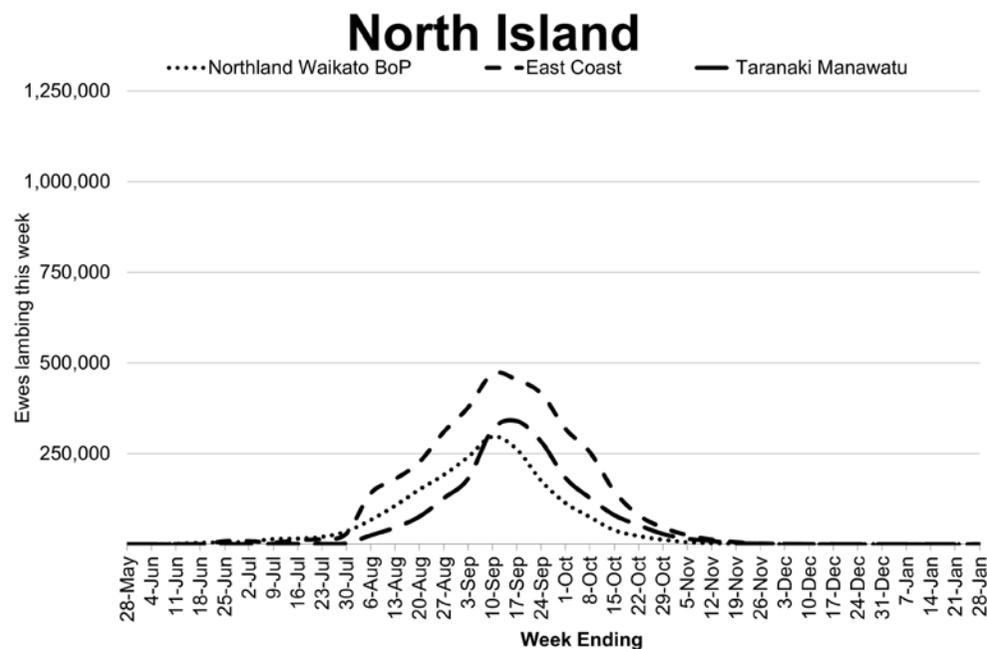
Soil moisture levels were near normal through most of Otago and northern Southland in mid November. However, the south-west and south-east corners of Southland were drier than usual, particularly in an area centred on Tuatapere. Farmers will be watching weather patterns closely to monitor the impact of the forecast El Niño this summer.

A change in Government was welcomed by many farmers and many expect that timeframes for meeting regulatory requirements may be extended and some rules may change. However, much uncertainty remains. Farmers in two Southland catchments must have completed certified FWFP in place by February 2025.

Changes in the rules for offshore investment in forestry to meet the “General benefit to New Zealand” test, rather than the “Special Forestry Test” have contributed to a marked slow-down in the number of sheep and beef farms purchased for conversion to forestry. Changes in rules relating to forest harvest also appear to have contributed to this trend. Land already purchased for forestry conversion will continue to be planted in trees over the next two to three years as seedling stock becomes available, further reducing livestock numbers in the south.



Ewe Lambing Dates by Region in 2023



Variation in ewe lambing dates between regions is largely due to differences in pasture availability in response to geographically different climates. This is a management response by farmers to ensure that ewes are lambing when feed availability and weather conditions are typically good to provide lambs with the best possible start.

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Appendix Regional Lamb Crop table

				Northland- Waikato-BoP	East Coast	Taranaki- Manawatū	North Island	Marlborough- Canterbury	Otago	Southland	South Island	NEW ZEALAND
2021-22	Ewes to Ram	(000)	1	2,020	3,938	1,920	7,878	3,092	2,871	2,486	8,448	16,326
2022-23	Ewes to Ram	(000)	2	1,884	3,628	1,901	7,413	3,059	2,763	2,242	8,063	15,476
2023-24e	Ewes to Ram	(000)	3	1,872	3,551	1,903	7,326	3,022	2,774	2,213	8,009	15,335
2021-22	Lambs from Ewes	(000)	1	2,578	4,926	2,619	10,124	3,841	3,518	3,173	10,532	20,656
2022-23	Lambs from Ewes	(000)	2	2,286	4,632	2,515	9,433	3,859	3,293	2,784	9,936	19,369
2023-24e	Lambs from Ewes	(000)	3	2,544	4,769	2,611	9,924	3,850	3,373	2,780	10,003	19,927
2021-22	Ewe Lambing %	(%)	1	127.6%	125.1%	136.4%	128.5%	124.3%	122.5%	127.6%	124.7%	126.5%
2022-23	Ewe Lambing %	(%)	2	121.3%	127.7%	132.3%	127.3%	126.2%	119.2%	124.2%	123.2%	125.2%
2023-24e	Ewe Lambing %	(%)	3	135.9%	134.3%	137.2%	135.5%	127.4%	121.6%	125.6%	124.9%	129.9%
2021-22	Lambs from Hoggets	(000)	1	187	371	173	731	268	130	167	565	1,297
2022-23	Lambs from Hoggets	(000)	2	96	278	126	500	239	167	110	516	1,016
2023-24e	Lambs from Hoggets	(000)	3	108	240	130	477	199	170	138	507	984
2021-22	Total Lambs Tailed	(000)	1	2,765	5,297	2,792	10,855	4,109	3,648	3,340	11,097	21,953
2022-23	Total Lambs Tailed	(000)	2	2,382	4,910	2,641	9,933	4,098	3,460	2,894	10,452	20,385
2023-24e	Total Lambs Tailed	(000)	3	2,652	5,009	2,741	10,401	4,049	3,543	2,918	10,510	20,911

1 Statistics New Zealand ewe numbers and lamb numbers

2 Statistics New Zealand ewe numbers, Beef + Lamb New Zealand Economic Service Lamb Crop Survey

3 Beef + Lamb New Zealand Economic and Farm Insights Stock Number Survey and Lamb Crop Survey

e Beef + Lamb New Zealand Economic and Farm Insights Estimate