



Sheep, Beef & Deer News

January 2026 – Summer support

Facial Eczema: Staying ahead of summer risk

Facial eczema (FE) is one of those animal health challenges that can quietly build in the background before its effects are fully realised. While some seasons and regions carry more risk than others, January and February are the key months to stay alert, especially when warm temperatures combine with humidity or late summer rain.

FE affects sheep, cattle and deer, damaging the liver and reducing production, fertility and overall resilience. As Beef + Lamb NZ and MPI both highlight, production losses often occur well before obvious clinical signs appear, making prevention far more effective than treatment.

What drives FE risk?

The toxin responsible for FE is produced by a fungus that grows on dead pasture litter under warm, moist conditions. Risk can increase quickly when:

- Night-time temperatures stay above 12–13°C.
- Humidity remains high.
- Pastures are long, rank or slow to decompose.

Even regions that don't experience FE every year can see risk emerge under the right conditions.

Early warning signs to watch for

- Reduced appetite or performance.
- Lethargy or reluctance to move.
- Animals seeking shade or avoiding sunlight.
- Reddening of skin (often a later sign).

Prevention is key

Zinc remains the most effective protection, but timing matters. It works best before liver damage occurs, not after. Common options include adding zinc to drinking water, oral zinc oxide dosing and slow-release zinc boluses.

Each has different labour and management considerations, and the "best" option depends on your stock class, water setup and risk profile. Treatment should be combined with stock and pasture management.

If you're unsure whether FE protection is needed this season, your Farmfirst team can help assess current risk, testing options and prevention timing often saving both cost and stress later on.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

- Supporting growth through the summer feed pinch.
- Mitigating heat stress.
- Checking ewe udders.
- Preventing fly strike.
- Seasonal reminders.
- Product spotlight.

Contact your local Farmfirst Veterinary team

Te Awamutu

49 Benson Road
Te Awamutu 3800
Ph 07 872 0240
teawamutu@myfarmfirst.co.nz

Ōtorohanga

18 Tuhoro Street
Ōtorohanga 3900
Ph 07 873 8275
otorohanga@myfarmfirst.co.nz

Te Kūiti

6 Seddon Street
Te Kūiti 3910
Ph 07 878 0020
tekuiti@myfarmfirst.co.nz

King Country

Turaki Street
Taumarunui 3920
Ph 07 895 7585
kingcountry@myfarmfirst.co.nz



Supporting growth through summer

Recognising slowing performance early enough to act

For dry stock farmers, January and February often mark a challenging time for growth of young stock and finishing stock. Hot daytime temperatures and less frequent rainfall set the scene for drops in liveweight gain which can have a disproportionate impact on stock finishing timelines and profitability. The key is recognising the pinch early and responding before animal performance is compromised.

What changes over summer?

- Pasture growth rates dive, reducing the amount of green food on offer.
- What is on offer becomes less palatable and lower in energy and protein.
- Livestock water demand increases significantly.

The impact on individual animals is a change in grazing behaviour with reduced bite size and grazing time.

The impact on the mob or herd is “maintenance mode” and as the summer dry scenario extends for a longer time, a tail end of lighter or low condition score livestock will increase in size due to competition for feed.

Practical strategies that make a difference

1. Monitor performance, not just pasture

Monitor the level of flock/mob competition – do a snap random sampling of 50 animals – (liveweights of lambs, yearlings, body condition scoring of ewes) to determine the need to raft off animals that are not handling the competition to help next step decision making.

2. Prioritise young stock

Lambs and weaner cattle are most sensitive to quality drops and will benefit most from feed prioritisation or supplementation.

3. Water and shade matter

Ensure that:

- Trough flow rates meet peak demand.
- Shade is available where possible.
- Livestock are not walking excessive distances in heat.

Looking ahead to autumn

Summer performance strongly influences finishing dates, winter feed demand and overall system flexibility. **A short check-in with your Farmfirst vet team now can help identify whether nutrition, health or environment is limiting performance and prevent small issues becoming expensive ones.**

Heat stress:

Small changes that protect performance

Heat stress doesn't need extreme temperatures to affect animal welfare and productivity. Even short periods of heat, especially when combined with humidity or yarding, can lead to reduced intake, weight gain and reproductive performance. Timely management decisions can play a major role in preventing heat stress.

Signs of heat stress

- Open mouth panting or rapid breathing.
- Reduced grazing activity.
- Crowding around water.
- Increased lying time.

Practical ways to reduce risk

- Handle stock early in the morning or late in the day.
- Avoid long yarding, transport or mustering during peak heat.
- Provide access to shade, especially for cattle and deer.
- Minimise mixing or unnecessary movement during hot spells.



Images courtesy of Beef+Lamb NZ

Summer in the Waikato+King Country: What to keep front of mind

Warm nights, high humidity and sudden rain events mean that summer risks can escalate quickly in the region.

Local focus areas

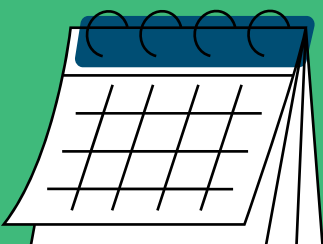
- Facial eczema risk can rise rapidly – even after short rain.
- High fly pressure increases flystrike and pink eye risk.
- Humidity amplifies heat stress, especially in cattle and deer.
- Pasture quality can decline faster than covers suggest.

Our Waikato+King Country tip

If you're unsure whether conditions are "risky enough" to act, that's usually the right time to check in. Early prevention almost always costs less than late response.

Talk to your local Farmfirst team about

- ✓ FE monitoring and zinc options
- ✓ Summer fly control plans
- ✓ Water system checks under peak demand



Seasonal reminders

- ☐ Check FE spore counts after any rain or humid nights
- ☐ Keep zinc plans up to date (don't wait for symptoms)
- ☐ Watch dags and flystrike risk
- ☐ Clean troughs regularly to maintain water quality
- ☐ Handle stock early or late to avoid heat stress



Checking ewe udders

A summer job to reduce a problem in spring at lambing

The problem is reduced lamb survival and an annoying, persistent small group of small framed lambs at weaning. One of the many causes of reduced flock lamb survival every year is udder defects of the ewes at lambing.

Studies carried out by Massey University (1) on commercial farms found that 5% of mixed-age ewes have udder defects and lambs born to ewes with udder defects have a death rate that is 3 to 4 times higher than lambs whose dams have normal udders. Those that survive grow on average 25g/day slower to be lighter lambs at weaning.

Checking ewe udders by palpation (feeling by hand) at, or just after, weaning is an important part of the solution. However, the studies found that many ewes with apparently normal udders at weaning were found to have udder defects when palpated 4-6 weeks AFTER weaning, when it is much easier to feel defects once the udder has completely dried off.

Palpation is best done while the ewe is standing in a race. Both halves of the udder should be gently squeezed and if possible, the teats rolled between the fingers.

- Ewes with **generalised hardness** in one or both halves of their udder would indicate mastitis and should be culled as should ewes found with a **burst abscess**.
- **Lumps within the udder tissue** can range in number and size but as a rule, ewes with lumps within the udder tissue should be culled.
- Ewes with **small lumps attached to the udder but not within the udder tissue** just in front of, or behind, the udder can be retained.
- Ewes with very **damaged teat ends** should be culled, but ewes with abrasions and scarring on their teats from lambs could be retained.

Heathy udders



Hard udder on RHS



Images courtesy of Beef+Lamb NZ (Ewe Wastage in commercial sheep flocks Flay KJ, Ridler AL, Corner-Thomas RA, Kenyon PR. NZVJ, 2022, Vol 7.)



Preventing fly strike in sheep

Staying one step ahead this summer

Flystrike is one of the most significant animal welfare risks sheep face over summer. It can escalate quickly, cause severe pain and stress, and lead to production losses – often at the busiest time of year when labour is stretched. The good news is that flystrike is largely preventable with early planning, regular checks and the right protection strategy.

Beef + Lamb NZ and MPI both emphasise that the most successful flystrike control programmes are proactive, not reactive. January and February are the months when that approach matters most.

Why flystrike risk rises in summer

Blowflies are attracted to warm, humid conditions and areas of fleece that stay damp or contaminated. Risk increases when:

- Temperatures rise and humidity increases.
- Sheep develop dags or scouring.
- Fleeces are long or heavily soiled.
- Stock spend time in sheltered rest areas.

Once strike begins, it can progress rapidly – meaning early prevention is far preferable to treating affected animals.

Early warning signs: what to watch for

Walking mobs regularly is still one of the most effective tools farmers have. Watch for:

- Sheep lagging behind or separating from the mob.
- Excessive tail wagging or biting at the fleece.
- Dark or damp patches in the wool.
- A strong smell around affected animals.

If sheep are already struck, immediate treatment is essential to protect welfare and prevent further losses.

Prevention starts with management

Flystrike control works best when chemical protection is supported by good stock and pasture management. Key management tools include:

- **Dag control:** Crutch or shear before dags become a problem. Prioritise lambs, hoggets and multiple-bearing ewes.
- **Nutrition consistency:** Sudden diet changes increase scouring risk, attracting flies.
- **Parasite control:** Internal parasites often contribute to dags.
- **Regular monitoring:** Short, frequent checks are more effective than occasional long ones.

These steps reduce risk, but they don't remove it entirely – which is where preventative treatments play an important role. Keep reading to see the options available to you, no matter your stock class or need.

Preventing fly strike in sheep (continued)

Staying one step ahead this summer

To support consistent, confident decision-making, we've included our Flystrike Decision Tree below.

It's designed to help answer three practical questions:

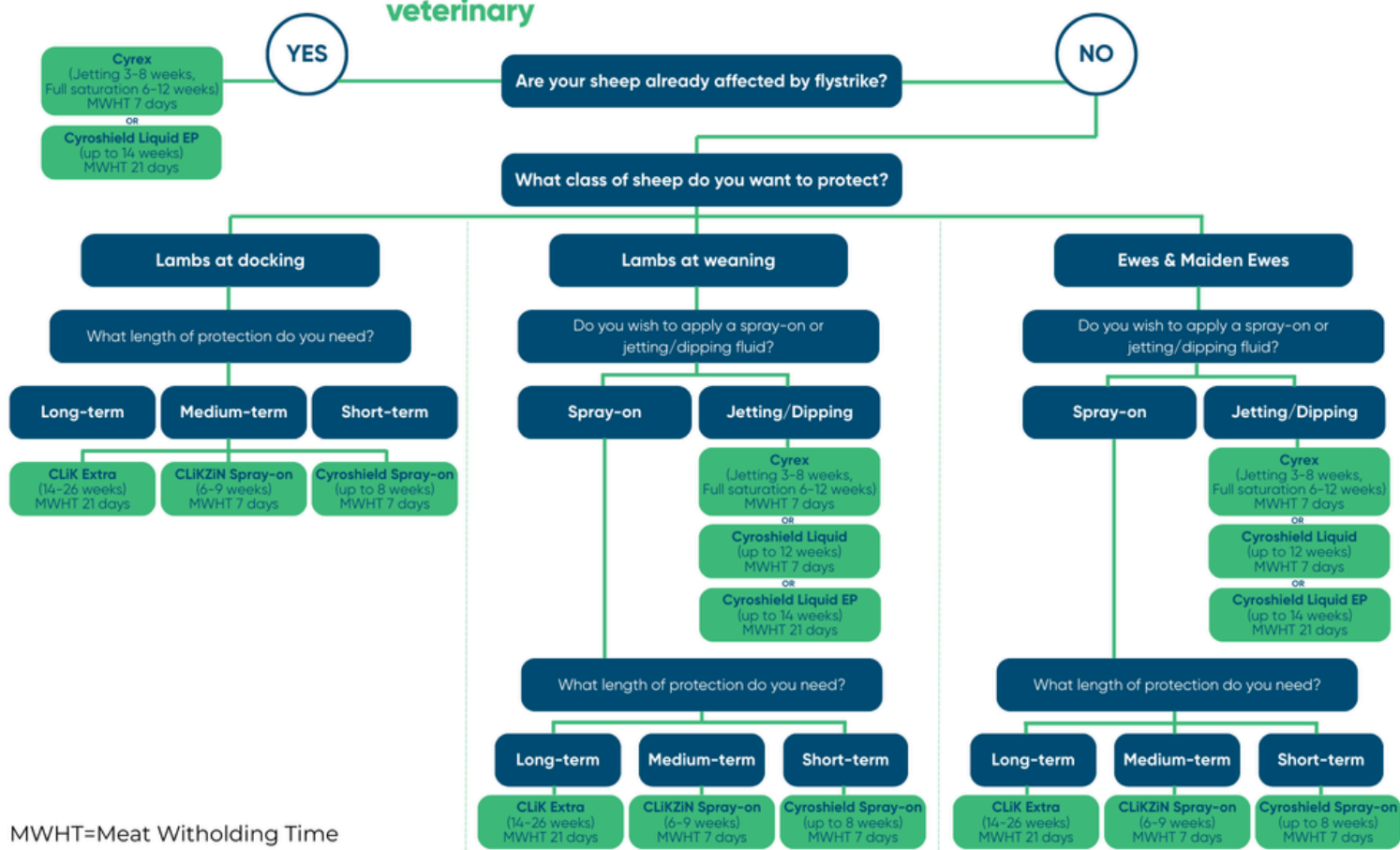
1. Are sheep already struck, or are we preventing strike?
2. Which class of sheep is being treated? (lambs, ewes, maiden ewes).
3. How long do they need to be protected for? (short, medium or long term).

The decision tree then guides you toward appropriate treatment types (spray-on vs jetting/ dipping) and protection duration, while clearly showing meat withholding times – critical for planning.

The goal is not 'using more product', but using the right tool, at the right time, for the right mob.



Blowfly Strike Protection



Talk to your Farmfirst Vet or Commercial Advisor about the best options for your farm, animals and management needs. Your Farmfirst Tech Team are also here to help - letting you get back to work on-farm.

Product Spotlight, January 2026

We're here to help you meet your goals with maximum return on your animal health and farm performance investment. Check out this month's spotlight products and talk to your Farmfirst Veterinary team about getting the right products for you on-farm today.



Matrix C Hi-Mineral 20L

Three-way drench to combat mixed infections of gastrointestinal parasites, including those with single or dual resistance to any of the three major drench families.

This month: \$2,547.96+GST

Time Capsule bolus packs

New Zealand made Facial Eczema Prevention for cattle and sheep administered in bolus form to release a consistent daily dose of zinc oxide to help prevent facial eczema for 4 weeks in cattle and 6 weeks in sheep.

Talk to your Farmfirst team about special pricing for your farm!

Great pricing available!



Seraphos 1250 5L

For the eradication of lice and keds and control of blowfly and cattle ticks on sheep.

This month: \$770.00+GST

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Te Awamutu

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otorohanga@myfarmfirst.co.nz

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6 Seddon Street
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