Sheep loading ramps

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A well designed and strategically placed loading ramp enables quick safe and effective loading with reduced risk of injury and stress. A good ramp will load animals quickly and quietly, reducing stress and time off feed which will in turn preserve muscle glycogen and meat eating quality.

Having the ramp face north or south will prevent sheep baulking at the rising or setting sun and provide even shadows along the length of the ramp during the day. The ramp can come off ground level at a convenient place in the yards with a bugle off from the main sheep pathway.

Yards that hold deck loads of animals in rectangular yards prevent animals wasting valuable energy milling around while they wait for the truck to arrive. A ramp out of a shearing shed provides a suitable section of grating to keep sheep clean prior to marketing and is at the required level for access to sheep floats.

The loading ramp should be positioned on the farm so that introduced animals enter into a bio-secure location on the farm for an appropriate quarantine period. Feed and water should be available in this area to provide for a stay until the animal(s) prove not to be a biosecurity risk to the farm or flock currently on the farm.

This area will need access to handling facilities for internal and external parasite treatments and to secure any diseases or parasites the animals may carry in or on them in an environment that is sunny and dry and inhospitable to the disease or parasites.

A small holding paddock close to facilities should be available to provide feed and water for the introduced animals if they need to stay isolated for a period.

A suitable loading ramp is three to five metres long and long enough so that when fully raised the angle is not greater than 30 degrees above level. The ramp should be from 500 mm to 1000 mm wide with closed in sides 800 mm high. A wide ramp will allow sheep to move as a mob for efficient loading. Ramp height should be 1200 mm for a single deck or 2050 mm for double deck, 4500 mm for three decks and 5300 mm for a four deck float.

The longer and wider the ramp, the stronger the construction will need to be to carry the weight of sheep and operator. Safety rails will be required on operator walkways.

Picture 1: An adjustable ramp for a variety of sheep floats heights. NB there is a level entry to the float at this height and safety rails for the operator. Photograph by E Joshua.

Sheep can cope with one change of status at a time:

- Sheep can go from the flat to up a ramp or from a ramp onto the flat
- Sheep can go from the flat onto a float;

Sheep will have difficulty going from an inclined ramp directly into a float. Combine this with a change of direction to the left or right and moving sheep onto or off the float will be very difficult.

A level entry to a stock float is important at any height, so animals can move from the level ramp into the float on the same plane.

An adjustable loading ramp with a level entry to the stock floats will suit a range of vehicle types and sizes. The ramp, when empty, may be lifted by a winch where use is made of different floats and deck heights are likely to vary.

A safety apparatus will be required to secure an adjustable ramp when loaded with sheep and

people. If it is necessary to accommodate a large variety of floats then consider providing more than one loading ramp using a range of design heights and structures.

Picture 2: A loading ramp out of a shearing shed provides an adjustable level bridge between the ramp and the float with safety rails to protect the operator. Photograph by G Casburn.

The materials used to make a ramp should reduce noise and focus the sheep on the animals moving forward into the float. Rubber conveyer belt on the side and rubber tyres or wood across the floor of the ramp are useful in cushioning hooves and providing grip without creating sharp noise, while preventing the sheep seeing through any gaps to the ground below.

A walkway and handrail adjacent to the ramp is useful to safely accommodate the shepherd or transport driver to assist animals in loading into and unloading from floats. A risk assessment is a useful tool in assessing the OH&S risk associated with loading sheep. The assessed risks can be considered when engineering a new loading ramp so that both sheep and operators can safely move from yards to vehicle and back again when loading and unloading animals.

Picture 3: A ramp using old truck tyres across the floor to provide quiet grip. Photograph E Joshua.

Further Reading

Valuable information can be gained on the placement of the loading ramp within the sheep yards from Primefact 924, “Circular sheep yard design and construction” at http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/livestock/sheep/yards-equipment/general/circular-yard

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