Abstracts – Sheep Milk NZ Conference

#6 Designing early weaning approaches to optimise lamb growth and milk harvesting
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About twenty five percent of the total milk yield of a dairy ewe is produced in the first thirty days of lactation. Thus, not milking ewes during this period limits total milk yield over a lactation season. Dairy ewes are capable of producing more milk than required by the suckling lambs for normal lamb growth. To maximize commercial milk production and lamb growth, mixed management systems that allow for suckling and machine milking have been described. Such systems are widely used for sheep and goats around the world but are yet to be developed for the emerging dairy sheep industry in New Zealand. In housed dairy sheep systems in North America, a mixed system where lambs are separated from ewes for a portion of the day has been shown to increase the lactation milk yield by 27% relative to ewes not milked for the first 30 days of lactation without compromising lamb growth. The objective of this study was to evaluate a modified mixed system on lactation milk yield and lamb growth in dairy sheep in New Zealand in a pastoral grazing system where lambs are naturally reared. Key findings of the study were that early (weaned from 4 weeks of age) versus standard weaning (weaned from 6 weeks of age) of naturally reared lambs using a mixed system increased total milk yield from the ewes without compromising pre-weaning (292 vs 307 g/day) or post-weaning (168 vs 161 g/day) growth rate.