

producer case studies

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Tasmania: Robbie and Eliza Tole (sheepmeat)

You can never have too many ideas, Tasmanian lamb producer Robbie Tole reckons, which is why a strong working relationship with his agronomist wife Eliza and initiatives like the Making More from Sheep are good for his business.

Mr Tole, who weans about 3500 lambs a year, is a producer advocate for Making More from Sheep a joint initiative between Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) and Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI).

Lambs are one aspect of the Toles' multi-faceted farming business on 545 ha at 'Greenvale', near Cressy, where they also have a cattle trading enterprise, grow irrigated pasture and fodder crops, and produce grass seed, peas, beans and poppies.

An agronomist is employed to advise on crop and pasture production, but Eliza adds an extra layer of expertise to the business.

Even though she is currently occupied with the couple's 16-month-old son and the farm's office, Eliza said being able to use her agronomy training in day-to-day farm management has enabled her to stay engaged with the farm while dealing with the challenges of motherhood.

For his part, Mr Tole said he couldn't manage the complex demands of the farm and look out for upcoming opportunities without his wife's input.

"We're always running ideas past each other," he said.

For similar reasons, he believes Making More from Sheep could help sheep producers of all kinds identify opportunities and strategies they may not have identified on their own.

Like the popular MLA More Beef from Pastures program for southern beef producers, *Making More from Sheep - A sheep producer's manual* pulls together proven best-practice principles and tools for sheep production into one comprehensive manual.

Designed as an evolving best-practice reference manual, Making More from Sheep covers the full breadth of sheep production in a level of detail not seen before. Wool, prime lambs, genetics, pastures, and animal health are among the subjects included in the manual's 11 modules, all of which can be updated to accommodate new research.

Mr Tole said a number of the principles included in the manual's lamb and pasture sections are used on 'Greenvale'.

His self-replacing ewe flock is evolving from a Romney- base, with 40 percent joined to Coopworth rams – a breed with strong maternal traits – to get a self-replacing second-cross ewe. The remainder are joined to a Poll Dorset terminal sire.

Ewes are first joined at about eight months, at an average weight of just over 40 kilograms and a minimum weight of 38kg. Scanning percentages for these maiden ewes are around 124 percent, compared to an average of 165 percent for mature sheep. Anything not in lamb after the five-week mating is culled.

The weight range was arrived at after assessing the difference in scanning percentages between ewes joined at 42kg and those joined at 46kg. There was no difference between 42kg and 46kg, Mr Tole said, so the average joining rate was reduced to the minimum weight.

Lambs are weaned at 10-12 weeks, onto irrigated rape crops where possible, or otherwise high-performance ryegrass-clover pastures.

In recent years the first lambs have been turned off at 15-16 weeks, dressing out at 19kg.

Cost of production, a subject covered in Module 1 of the manual, is a primary indicator of enterprise health, Mr Tole said. "If you don't know how much it costs to produce a kilo of lamb, how do you know whether the price you're receiving is a good one?"

He also uses an assessment of kilograms of lamb produced per hectare to benchmark his production.

Most lamb producers will gain something fresh from Making More from Sheep, Mr Tole believes, but it will be especially valuable for less experienced producers, like those who are currently moving away from wool into sheepmeat production.

"If you're looking to make prime lambs a major part of your business, the manual is a great guide to how to approach the business. Top lamb producers may already be doing a lot of it, but they should find something to refresh their knowledge."