

# Drought-proofing and flexibility

## Foresight and flexibility have changed the fortunes and future for Tasmanian sheep producers, Paul and Annette Fergusson.

When the so-called permanent creek on their Runnymede property stopped flowing in the mid 1990s, the Fergussons built a 315-megalitre dam that they have since used for stock water and pasture irrigation.

"Up until 1990 the average annual rainfall was 725mm in this district. Since then the average has been around 600mm and in the last two years we've had annual totals of 257 and 428mm, so things are pretty tough," Mrs Fergusson said.

"When the creek stopped flowing we felt that we had to develop strategies to survive with less rainfall, and that's when we built the dam. At the time people around here might have thought we were going a bit overboard making the dam so big, but the dam has paid for itself time and time again. It effectively means we have drought-proofed our property," she said.

## Production targets

The Fergussons' sheep enterprise features Merino ewes, from which they sell wool and produce first-cross prime lambs using Texel rams.

The couple use water from their large dam to irrigate their clover, phalaris and cocksfoot pastures and cell graze their property, using grazing management to promote pasture health.

"In the past we have been part of benchmarking groups, where we set firm production targets and worked in with other producers to achieve our goals. Our management approach is probably a bit less formal these days, but we still make a production plan each year, so we set key dates for reproduction, shearing and lamb weaning," Mrs Fergusson said.

"It is very valuable having an on-farm water supply. We use the dam to irrigate pastures to finish off the lambs. We sell our lambs through the saleyards when they are about five months old."

## Informed choices

The couple has a long history of involvement in external production programs, using knowledge from others to inform the management choices they make in their business. In recent years, the Fergussons have been involved in AWI's 8 x 5 program, and since the launch of *Making More From Sheep – A sheep producer's manual* by AWI and MLA early last year, the Fergussons have assessed their operation against industry standards to identify possible improvements they can make to their operation.

"We have engaged in a number of property management programs over the years, and something like *Making More From Sheep – A sheep producer's manual* is helpful because it provides a structured way to assess aspects of your business to see what you are already doing well, and where you can make improvements," said Mr Fergusson.

The manual contains 11 modules covering a range of management issues, including business planning, marketing, pasture and soil

management, protection of natural assets and stock husbandry.

Mrs Ferguson said, "I feel we are doing well with many elements contained in the manual. We manage our pastures to maximise soil and pasture health and also we've protected our waterways and other sensitive areas by fencing them off and providing reticulated water for the stock. In recent years we've had some troubles with our lambing rates, and this year we've been part of a trial run by the Department of Primary Industries, which is trying to find why many producers in this area are down on lamb production."

## MORE INFORMATION

Paul and Annette Fergusson

Phone: 03 6265 0656

Email: [fergusson@intas.net.au](mailto:fergusson@intas.net.au)

*Annette and Paul Fergusson say one of the benefits of the Making More From Sheep – A sheep producer's manual is that it provides a structured way to assess their business.*



## THE MANUAL

*Making More From Sheep – A sheep producer's manual* contains 11 modules covering a range of management issues, including business planning, marketing, pasture and soil management, protection of natural assets and stock husbandry.

In one handy reference the manual captures the experience of leading sheep producers and technical specialists and the latest recommendations from research and development to help users identify and improve the 20% of decisions that have 80% of the impact on business profitability and risk control.

*Making More From Sheep – A sheep producer's manual* costs \$65+GST for MLA members and can be ordered from MLA on 1800 675 717 and selecting option 3 or on the program website [www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au](http://www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au). Information on Making More From Sheep activities, forums and workshops can also be found on the website.

