

Making More From Sheep



case study

Monday, 12 July 2010

Fine-tuning lamb finishing

In a highly productive lamb breeding and finishing enterprise, genetics can make a very big difference.

For Tasmanian producers, Robbie and Eliza Tole, 'Greenvale' via Cressy, the time taken to finish lambs requires some focus, careful planning and fine-tuning.

"We're currently aiming to turn-off around 8,500 lambs of between 18 – 22 kg dressed weight and condition score 3 for the domestic market in as short a period of time as possible," Robbie says.



The first drafts are sold as 14 week old suckers and the balance of the drop are weaned on to pastures or fodder crops with grain supplement to be marketed as they reach target weights and condition.

However, with the nutrition and animal health regimes all working well, Robbie Tole says the challenge has moved towards securing and using 'balanced' rams.

"Industry has been using rams with high-muscle, high-growth and low-fat ASBVs, and that has worked well in lifting our lamb production and yield.

"However, some lambs don't reach target condition score at the domestic market specifications in time, so we continue to manage them until they reach export grades, and we're able to forward contract them through the later autumn to winter period.

"The scientists are also reminding us that to ensure taste and eating quality attributes are optimal, we need to maintain a balanced selection. So, we're now looking for terminal sires with a 'positive-fat' trait."

Robbie says unfortunately, there's not many rams available that have positive or neutral ASBVs for fat depth while having desirable values for the other key traits.

"The alternative is to put more emphasis on breeding ewes which carry more fat."

'Greenvale' is a mixed livestock and cropping farm, with average annual rainfall of 690 mm on mostly arable ground - 400 ha of highly productive black, self-mulching soils and the balance (115 ha) on steeper and some rocky ground under native pastures and a 30 ha pine plantation.

Usually, 180 hectares is given to crops each year – spring-sown peas, poppies and potatoes. After harvest in January/February, annual ryegrass and winter wheat varieties are direct-drilled to provide a quality quick and productive bulk of autumn fodder for ewes and lambs.

This is grazed from six weeks after sowing right through to spring, when they are grazed out and removed to make way for the next crop rotation. A proportion is cut for silage as a dry matter reserve. At the end of the three year rotation, paddocks are sown down to perennial ryegrass/clover pasture.

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Making More from Sheep Forums

The Tole's have used the *Making More From Sheep* program as a reference and production back-up since 2008, and Robbie will attend the 'Its ewe time!' forum at Carrick on Thursday July 29 for an update.

"I'll be going; it's a good opportunity to keep up with the latest sheep and lamb market insights, R&D findings and practical 'take home and do' ideas. People should consider attending."

Market intelligence indicates the sheep and lamb industry needs to make every ewe count, hence the theme of the *Making More From Sheep* forums: 'It's ewe time'.

To register for the forum at the Carrick Ag Fest Function Centre, call MLA on 1800

675 717.

Building farm flexibility

In order for livestock or cropping opportunities to be pursued as they arise, the Tole's reduced 'Greenvale' ewe numbers by 1,000 head in 2008.

The ewe flock now consists of 1600 Composite ewes with a "splash" of Romney Marsh genetics. Forty percent are joined to brought-in Coopworth rams – a breed with strong maternal traits – to breed specialist replacement second-cross dams; the remainder are joined to Poll Dorset terminal sires. Fertility and fecundity are not issues at 'Greenvale'.

"The most recent pregnancy scanning showed a 177% pregnancy rate from a four-week joining, while the ewe lambs were scanned at 133% from a six-week joining.

"The marking percentage varies according to seasonal conditions; last year was very wet and we still recorded 135%. We're normally around 140%," Robbie says.

Last year, the Tole's identified lamb finishing as a business opportunity. Near 7,000 lambs were purchased from the mainland and around Tasmania for intensive short-term finishing on surplus pasture, fodder-crops and barley supplements (at an average consumption of 150-200 grams/day through self-feeders).

"The lambs arrive at average 37-38kg live weight, and we aim to put another 10kgs on them quickly. They're drafted into tight weight range mobs and sold as they reach market weights - some take one month, others can take up to three months and longer.

"It's clear that having consistent fast-finishing lambs is important, and given feed and animal health is not a problem, we're looking to genetics for help."

Robbie says there are a lot of do's and don'ts in the finishing enterprise and it adds another element of risk and capital outlay to the business.

“For example, you could have investments worth \$2,000/ha literally running around; so it’s all finely-tuned and has to be managed carefully. We monitor weight gain and animal health very closely and use a mix of marketing options,” he says.

The topics to be featured at the Carrick ‘Its ewe time!’ forum include:

- The new ewe
- Weaning more lambs
- Healthy and contented sheep
- Making sheep easier to manage
- Turning pasture into product
- Profitable finishing systems
- Aussie lamb – the world’s best
- Planning for success

To book a seat at the forum, call MLA on 1800 675 717.

For more information on Making More from Sheep go to

www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au

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Event Partners – The Sheep CRC, Elders, Landmark, and Roberts (in Tasmania) and Event Supporters – the Sheepmeat Council of Australia, the Australian Meat Processor Corporation and State Primary Industries Agencies, are collaborating to deliver the forums.

Making More From Sheep is a best-practice package of information, tools and learning opportunities for Australian sheep producers funded by MLA and AWI. The website contains all the content within the Making More From Sheep program including the producer’s manual and CD-Rom, and information about learning activities.

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For more information on The Making More from Sheep 2010 Forums go to www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au or call MLA on 1800 675 717 to register.