

Making More From Sheep



Australian Wool
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'It's ewe time!' in the Riverina

Vicky Geddes says the resonating point for her was that researchers can now put dollar-values on the genetic linkages between muscling, growth and fat, and easy-care, robust sheep.

"Industry can now use ASBVs to easily select for those particular traits, and we have already moved to build our flock's genetic capacity to be easier to manage and more robust."

Vicky, and husband Tony, manage near 2,000 hectares on 'Yallock' and some neighbouring land north-east of Holbrook, NSW; it's a grazing operation geared on fine merino wool, cropping and trade cattle.



With an average rainfall of 700mm/year (460mm so far in 2011), the Geddes run upwards of 13,000 sheep and up to 800 head of trade cattle across the year, at a stocking rate of 14DSE/ha. Cereal cropping on 500 ha rounds-out the enterprise mix on a farm they intend to make environmentally sustainable and resilient.

The flock is based on 7,000 merino ewes, which provides 4000 merino weaners and 2500 X'bred sale lambs per year. Currently, 1200 merino wether 'woolcutters' are run, as with the trade cattle, these are the seasonal 'safety valve'. The flock is cutting 5.5kgs per head (greasy) of 17-18 micron wool.

Unable to always find sufficient numbers of rams with the desired traits, the Geddes decided to breed their own.

"The advantage of having a small stud nucleus flock of 300 ewes - that are run under purely commercial conditions - is that we're able to apply very strong selection pressure for minimal cost.

"To accelerate genetic gain, we buy semen from industry leading sires and use both AI and ET. The nucleus-flock animals are tagged at birth with pedigrees recorded; and key traits such as body weight, eye muscle depth, micron, fleece weight, staple length and strength, SD and CV are measured throughout the animal's life.

"And by participating in MERINOSELECT and using ASBVs, we're progressing quickly. It was clear at the Ewe Time forum that these tools are real components of a modern grazing business."

Vicky says the flock she and Tony inherited consisted of 2,000 head of easy care 21-22 micron ewes and followers cutting 5.5kgs greasy.

"In 8 years we've used genetic tools to drop 3 microns while maintaining clean fleece weight and dramatically improving wool quality. Coefficient of Variation of fibre Diameter was in the low 20s, but this year's adult fleece lines were 16-18. Improved quality and fleece structure has also helped in the big wet of 2010 with only a couple of body strike cases across the whole flock. "

The Geddes' are not going-in for the 'dual-purpose' type of sheep: "We're more after the easy-doing type that converts feed into valuable fleece and rears lambs year in year out.

"It was clear through the drought years some ewes simply did better; we're discovering there is a genetic element to doing-ability and we can use ASBVs to select those individuals."

She says the Its Ewe Time! forum reinforced the value of well-rounded farm management.

"While good genetics are great, we have to also optimise nutrition, reproduction and parasite control.

"There's no point building a Ferrari if you are not going to give it the conditions to perform."

The Geddes are trying to shorten their late-summer joining down to 5 weeks to aid management and marketing, and are targeting an across-flock condition score of 2.5+.

"We're achieving 40% multiples in an average year - though the Merino weaning percentage is in that 95-100% range. We want to get it up higher to 110-120%, both for economic and animal welfare reasons - the wastage upsets me." Vicky says.

There is no 'recreational' drenching on Yallock; regular worm egg counting is standard practise to actually determine when sheep require treatment. Drench groups are rotated strategically to stave-off resistance.

But, again, genetics is being used to help. "We select against daggy sheep and are looking into using the ASBV for Dag to indicate which sheep resist or tolerate worm infection and scouring."

"We stopped mulesing 4 years ago. The ASBVs for breech wrinkle, cover and dag could become powerful genetic tools for reducing our need to mules."

Grass is more than just feed on Yallock: "We manage our pastures to provide energy and protein for the stock. I don't look at it as just grass – it is the engine room for the whole system and effectively we are grass farmers."

"It's important to get out and off the farm, and tap into the latest thinking. I'd recommend the 2011 Its Ewe Time! forums as one event that wool and lamb producers should put in the diary," she says.



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