

producer case studies

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South Australia: Ben Ryan (sheepmeat)

Taking his prime lamb operation from a “out-of-control V8 chainsaw” to one that requires as little as three days a week to manage has helped South Australian producer Ben Ryan get a firmer grasp on farm profitability – and helped him survive chronic depression.

“Farmers are always looking for the magic bullet to transform their operation, but that gives them an excuse not to act,” Mr Ryan says. “In my experience, you’re more likely to make radical change by putting lots of little things together. It’s about knocking off 3 percent in costs here, investing 5 percent there.”

In Mr Ryan’s case, the changes he made to his own farm five years ago may have saved the business. As soon as he’d got the enterprise operating smoothly, he succumbed to the depression that had been threatening to overwhelm him for years.

Because of the changes he’d made, he could successfully run the farm on the three or so days a week he managed to work. “It meant that myself and the business were able to survive for two years when I was otherwise virtually incapacitated,” he says.

Learning how to make business adjustments to the important profit drivers in sheep and wool enterprises, has just got a lot easier for sheep producers.

Best practice sheep industry tools and procedures are now available in the *Making More from Sheep – A producer’s manual*, a joint venture between Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) and Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI). This program does for the sheepmeat and wool industries what MLA’s popular More Beef from Pastures program did for the southern beef industry.

Based around the 11 key profit drivers, sheep producers can use the manual to identify areas for improvement and make changes, just like Mr Ryan.

Mr Ryan is a producer advocate for the Making More from Sheep program, which brings together the best current knowledge on sheep production and packages it for producers in a manual that will be updated as new knowledge comes to light.

Until about five years ago, Mr Ryan and his father ran a high input, production-focused prime lamb business based around 2000 Coopworth ewes on 460 hectare ‘Tent Rock’, near Delamere, SA.

It was a system that required “about 400 days a year input”, Mr Ryan said, and losing focus could mean chaos. “I’d learned about 10-15 high-performance farming techniques, but not how to integrate them into a whole system,” he recalls.

Things began to change when he attended a Resource Consulting Services (RCS) course and began to put profitability ahead of production. The course also sparked a single-minded focus on sustainability – an issue that he says now influences all major decisions on the farm.

Using principles which are now outlined in *Making More from Sheep – A sheep producer’s manual*, Mr Ryan implemented a cell grazing program, changed breeding cycles so that maximum feed demand coincided with the spring flush, and began to develop a system that built resilience, instead of taking constant work to maintain.

One of the strongest changes in this direction has occurred in his pastures, where groundcover has become the primary management goal.

“Previously, we struggled to get perennial pasture to persist,” he says. “We renovated some pastures every 3-4 years without long term success, and we’d been spraying thistles for 35 years, with no great change.”

“Now we only renovate if we want to change pasture species, insects and grubs aren’t an issue, and perennials are the norm. Dad sowed phalaris 40 years ago, and I hadn’t seen any until it began to reappear four years ago. Now the phalaris heads are all over some paddocks.”

“We saved \$45-\$50,000 when drought hit in the first year, because of our ability to manage feed in a cell grazing system. And because we had a better knowledge of our feed, we began to act quicker on destocking decisions.”

Lamb production hasn’t lifted, but it hasn’t slipped, either. Variable costs, like drenching, pasture renovation and pasture grub control, have fallen, and Mr Ryan believes the enterprise is now ready to fully capitalise on the hoped-for run of good seasons.

“I’m not trying to be the biggest and the best at anything,” he says of his management changes of the past five years. “I’ve just been trying to develop a system that retains a profitable farm, while allowing me the flexibility to do something else as well. For some, that might be trading on the sharemarket. For me, until now, it’s been learning how to deal with depression.”