

producer case studies

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Western Australia: Geoff Sandilands (wool)

Increasing wool cuts per hectare and stoking rates by 50 percent, has kept Geoff Sandilands's well-known Western Australian Merino operation Billandri ahead of the declining terms of trade that have hit wool producers over the past decade.

With a long-term average of 10,000 breeding ewes, and turning off 400-450 Poll Merino rams a year, Billandri is an enterprise where small adjustments in management can deliver big changes to returns.

For Mr Sandilands, genetics and grazing management have proved two of the most rewarding areas for change, in a business where changes must be made every year to stay ahead of the profit curve.

A decade ago, the Billandri flock cut 40-45 kilograms per hectare. Today it cuts around 60kg/ha.

At the same time, thanks to a shift in lambing from May to July-August to match maximum ewe feed demand with the feed flush in the Mt Barker area of southern WA, stocking rates have climbed 50 percent.

Despite the tough season experienced in the region, stocking rates at the Kendenup farm are currently 12.5 dry sheep equivalents (DSEs), compared to the 9-10 DSE long-term average for the Mt Barker district.

"On average we have around the same lambing percentages, but we've now got 50 percent more lambs per hectare," Mr Sandilands says.

He credits much of Billandri's competitive advantage to a long and mutually profitable association with the scientific community.

Mr Sandilands's father, C.W. (Bill) Sandilands, was keenly interested in the science of genetics when he founded Billandri stud in the late 1950s. That followed through to individual micron testing of stud sheep in 1971, sire evaluation programs in the same decade, wether trials in the mid-1990s and adoption of the new Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs).

This scientific focus has also seen Geoff Sandilands adopt the Pastures from Space satellite monitoring program, which allows him to get a handy overview of feed availability on his dispersed lease and freehold farms without having to hit the road.

"We know what feed is on the ground every week – it makes feed budgeting very easy," Mr Sandilands said.

"For instance, we now know that with a late break we will never grow more than eight to nine tonnes per hectare of feed – so there's no point in keeping 10t/ha worth of sheep in a paddock."

"It can also back up management decisions, such as when to stop feeding in the autumn because we

know growth rates are supplying enough feed to the sheep."

He believes that the rapidly advancing suite of tools and technology available to the sheep industry will help keep the Merino as an important part of a successful mixed farming business, which has been dumped by many WA producers in favour of the quick returns from cropping.

"I think the Merino will come into its own under high grain prices," Mr Sandilands says. "They enable producers to turn off wool, their main income, on a maintenance diet."

"We use wethers to set up our cropping country – we run them very hard to take out the pasture and weeds before we sow, and make money at the same time.

Mr Sandilands is contributing to a new program to help sheep producers, both wool and meat, get the most from their enterprises.

He is a 'producer advocate' for the new Making More from Sheep program, a joint venture between Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI) and Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA).

A world-class study of best practice sheep industry tools and procedures, Making More from Sheep collects the best available science on every facet of sheep meat and wool production and presents it in a comprehensive producer's manual.

Modelled on MLA's highly successful More Beef from Pastures program, *Making More from Sheep – A sheep producer's manual* allows sheep producers to access the latest procedures and tools for profitable and sustainable sheep production in their own time, and at their own pace.

Mr Sandilands says that the information contained in the manual sets a benchmark for best practice sheep production, against which producers can test their own strategies to see where they might make gains in their enterprise.

"I would think that most producers will find something in the manual that they don't know about, and can profitably use," he says.