



## Producer Case Study – Ashy Holdings

### Objective measurement — it simply makes cents

Will and Nina Bennett, *Ashby Holdings* are convinced that adopting objective measurement as part of their ram selection process has turned their wool enterprise around.

“In the period after I first came home about 12 years ago, our wool enterprise was really struggling with long-term low wool and sheepmeat prices and a fairly severe drought,” Will said.



“My reaction was to really analyse what we were doing to see if we could turn the business around — the alternative was to get out of wool.”

“Merinos are actually a great fit with our run country and cropping enterprise, so this wasn’t my preferred option.”

With the help of farm business advisor Phil Holmes, Will and Nina ran the numbers on their sheep to determine which ones were performing and which weren’t.

“Phil also advised us to go north (to the New England Tablelands in New South Wales) and look at what father and son team Grant and Jock Nivison were doing at *Yalgoo*.”

“*Yalgoo* is a stud and commercial wool enterprise that seemed to be going ahead in leaps and bounds in spite of the poor market conditions.”

What they found at *Yalgoo* was a passion for an objective approach to wool production, based on 41 years of hard data — and a highly profitable commercial wool enterprise.

Will and Nina have now incorporated *Yalgoo* genetics into their operation and continue to work closely with Jock and Grant to make further breeding improvements in their flock.

### The *Yalgoo* experience

As Jock Nivison is proud to tell you, the focus on objective measurement is nothing new at *Yalgoo*.

“During the late 1970s my grandfather used to go to all the shows and buy top-priced rams and when dad (Grant) came home he wasn’t convinced they were performing,” Jock said.

“Dad started testing rams and their progeny for micron and fleece weight — the profit drivers.”

“It was really about trying to get an idea about the spread of dollars individual sheep were making — there were sheep that were making \$100 dollars per head and sheep making \$20, under the same environmental conditions.”

“During the 1980s we started ranking our sheep on performance. We took all their data and ranked them on a combined measurement (fleece weight, body weight, CV and fibre diameter).”

“We went from 21 to 19 micron and wool cuts stayed around 4–5kg/hd in our ewes.”

### **Aiming for the sky**

During the 1990s *Yalgoo* joined a group of breeders in a CSIRO project that aimed to reduce fibre micron to 13 in 10 years.

“This was a real test case for putting pressure on micron while holding other traits,” Grant said.

“From 1997 to 2005 we went from 19 to 16.3 micron and fleece weights stayed the same, as did body weights. The perception was that when you put pressure on micron everything else would fall apart — it didn’t. And while we didn’t get to 13 micron, we are now down to 15.8 micron and current day fleece values have increased by 75% — that just makes good sense (and cents) to me.”

“During the past five years we have renewed our focus on fleece weight. We are achieving the same genetic progress for fleece weight as what we did when we were aggressively chasing micron reduction. We are throwing up 15 micron rams that are in the top 1% of the breed for fleece weight.”

According to Jock and Grant, the focus for the next 10 years is for the *Yalgoo* commercial flock to become a 15 micron flock cutting 7kg wool/hd.

“We currently use the 14% index, but we will move to a customised flock index that will focus more on fleece weight and less on micron reduction,” Jock said.

### **Back at Ashby Holdings**

After looking at the *Yalgoo* model and crunching the numbers, it was clear to Will and Nina that micron is the key to profit and there was significant room for improvement in the *Ashby* flock.

“Like Grant and Jock, we use the 14% + SS index, which puts significant pressure on fibre diameter, moderate pressure on increased staple strength and body weight, increased fleece weight and reproductive rates.”

“In our commercial flock we have reduced average micron from 19.8 to 17.5 during the past seven years, without compromising fleece weights and growth rates.”

Will and Nina test their hoggets for micron and fleece weight and now have their flock size back to where they want it. They will now rank their hoggets against the 14% + SS index and apply more selection pressure to their commercial flock.

“The wool price is good, our results are good and our wool enterprise now stacks up well against our other enterprises — cropping, prime lambs and cattle.”

For Will and Nina, the move to a more objective approach has been a common sense decision and they will continue to benchmark their flock and develop a breeding strategy that makes good cents.

### **For more information contact:**

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