Producer Case Study – Benham Tasmania

Electronic identification — weighing up the benefits

Making More from Sheep *producer advocates Nathan and Kirstie Anderson and their team at* Benham Tasmania *have found Gallagher's animal identification hardware and software yields multiple benefits*.

Benham has been in the O'Connor family since the early 1800s, and is now owned and managed by seventh-generation farmer Rob O'Connor and his wife Hanna.

Traditionally a superfine wool property, Rob and Hanna have undertaken some major irrigation developments, and diversified into sheepmeat, cattle, native forestry, plus broadacre dryland and irrigated cropping, with a diverse annual and perennial system (including wheat, triticale, canola, poppies and seed crops).

Nathan and his wife Kirstie manage *Benham*'s livestock operations and since their arrival have replaced a paper-based system with electronic identification, drafting, weighing and recording technology.

Kirstie says she couldn't see herself running sheep or cattle without them.

"They save time and they save money and time is money," she said

Nathan and Kirstie draft sheep using electronic tags and weights, and by rules created in the TSi with the auto drafter — this could be by individual animal, breed, weight, or whichever combination of criteria desired.

While wool comprises less of the property's income now than it did 10 years ago, the tools used are far more sophisticated and accurate according to Kirstie.

The Benham operation

Benham was traditionally a superfine (around 16 micron) Saxon-Spanish Merino sheep operation, with flock structure based on replacement wethers. In 1937 Benham achieved a world-record price at the Launceston wool sales, followed by an Australasian record for Merino wool in 1939 and many other seasonal-topping prices since then.

However, times have changed and the focus is now on a dual-purpose model that is flexible enough to take advantage of both wool and sheepmeat opportunities.

"We sold all the wethers a year ago, however with the return of reasonable wool prices we will retain the 2010 Merino wethers.

"This year, we joined 10,000 ewes — 4500 to Merino sires and the rest to Coopworth rams," Kirstie explained.

"Our aim is to produce cross-bred lambs that can be grown and finished on irrigated fodder crops for the domestic and export market. We're building up our first and second-cross Merino-Coopworth ewe flock; we join these as ewe lambs, so around seven months of age, and they'll then be mated to a terminal sire, with a heavy focus for growth and muscling."

"We're currently producing around 300 bales a year of wool, with an average micron in the Merino flock of 16.5."

The technology

The Benham team uses a range of animal-management equipment — a Gallagher Smart TSi, a hand-held SmartReader HR3, bar-code printer and reader, sheep autodrafter and numerous load bars.

"In our sheep operation, we use the autodrafter to record live weight and also use the TSi's session default option after events such as pregnancy scanning to rapidly record the result," Kirstie explains.

"For instance whether the ewe is empty, or it's a single or multiple pregnancy."

"We draft sheep using electronic tags and weights and rules created in the TSi with the autodrafter. This could be by ewe, breed, weight or whichever combination of criteria we want for that time."

"A ewe has to meet all those criteria to go out a certain draft gate."

"In our cross-bred lamb enterprise, we use the autodrafter to quickly weigh the sheep and draft them into sale lines. We then return stock to the paddocks in good time, reducing any stress that could otherwise affect their performance."

"In the current set-up we have with the EID recording, we can weigh and draft 600 sheep an hour."

Kirstie says they also use the EID system and autodrafter in the sheep stud to sort animals into mating mobs.

"This means we can then run them as one mob and draft just before lambing allow for more efficient management in the paddock and the mob. It's the same for drafting-out our cross-bred ewes into mating and lambing mobs."

At visual classing, each animal's history is instantly available, so Kirstie and Nathan can assess growth, wool values — available for each year — and the fertility result.

Watching wool

The *Benham* team also individually test greasy fleece weight and micron.

"We identify the mid-side sample taken when the sheep are in the shed for the pre-shearing crutch using the bluetooth barcode printer — there's no more reading tags and slowing down the operation," Kirstie explains.

"At shearing, each fleece is weighed, and recorded directly to the TSi; so we get a greasy fleece weight and we can then also add a comment."

"The fleece card, which has a bar-code label, is placed in a bin to identify the wool line, such as AAAM and so on. We then later scan this into the TSi."

The team also uses the Smart TSi in its Angus operation, recording cattle pedigree data and pregnancy-testing results, plus weights of trade stock.

Multiple benefits

Kristie says in the past, *Benham* has kept extensive computer records for the sheep stud.

"These had to be printed out, and then when each animal had its ear tag read, we'd have to find the results, manually note the classing decision, then entered into computer later. This was very demanding on both time and labour.

"As a result, there was not much enthusiasm for this system, and it was discontinued!

"The EID system allows us to accurately store vast amounts of information for both the stud and commercial mobs. Weighing sheep and drafting is much faster and can be done on more complex drafts than before."

"Because it is so simple and easy, we also tend to weigh more often, which is better in terms of managing condition. Plus, it accustoms animals to handling, so reduces stress on them."

Neither do they need three or four people to carry out activities: it's one looking after the technical side, and another person bringing up the sheep. Or in the case of the autodrafter only one person bringing up the mob.

While Kirstie and Nathan have experience with other systems, they are impressed with the ability of the Smart TSi to be updated to increase performance and reporting without any extra capital cost.

"And Gallagher will tell you, I do ask them to change and add lots of things!" Kirstie emphasised.

"It's user friendly for those with limited technical experience; however, does have the ability to increase performance for those with more needs, such as stud records and ASBV/EBV data sheets."

She says the all-Gallagher operation was one of the first off the rank with the Smart TSi and other electronic equipment.

"We are very proud to be part of helping develop the technology as our industry demands more individual animal management.

"Really, you've got to measure what you do otherwise you can't improve."

For owner Rob, who oversees all the operations it means quickly looking through a simplified Excel spreadsheet. This could just be one page, rather than trawling through copious amounts of material. It simplifies decisions and optimises time, leaving him free to get on with next thing, or another part of the big picture.

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