Producer Case Study – Norton Mandeville

Weaner growth rates hit their straps

For John Porter, *Norton Mandeville*, a successful prime lamb operation is not just about high weaning percentages — it's also about weaner growth rates.

Through better managing his feedbase and a strict supplementary feeding program, John Porter, *Norton Mandeville* has increased his weaners' "do-ability" enormously.

"When I first arrived we struggled with our weaner performance — I still had stragglers hanging around at 12 months of age," John said.

"Now all our weaners are gone by June — at nine months."

It's a number game

When John started as manager at *Norton Mandeville* in the Derwent Valley, the average for weaning percentage to ewes joined in the region for Merinos was about 74% — the property is currently sitting at 118% and John's not done yet.

"I saw this as being a huge income-generating opportunity if we could lift weaning rates from the current level of 7200 lambs to somewhere around 10,000 plus lambs," John said.

"Particularly if we could turn them off in a timely manner."

John's history was as a live cattle exporter and prime lamb producer and finisher. His first move was to shift the system from purebred Merinos to a composite lamb enterprise.

"Our ultimate goal is to have a prime lamb system with a weaning percentage of between 130–140%," John said.

"The process starts well before weaning and includes pregnancy scanning and managing for twins."

"More recently we have maximised lamb production by joining suitable ewe lambs while maintaining body condition score of 3 plus in all breeders before, during and post pregnancy."

Start with the feed base

While there are many steps involved with a shift in enterprise composition and increased growth rates, John believes making the most of your feed base is the first step.

“Our system includes irrigated lucerne, clover, plantain, fescue and perennial ryegrass pastures supported by rape and turnips for autumn feed,” John said.

A significant step was to adequately prepare lambs for the change-over at weaning as they head into a rapidly changing feed base.

Keeping the change-over simple was the challenge.

“We have ended up with a confined feeding arrangement made up of six pens (50 x 30 metres) each holding 400–450 lambs,” John explained.

“These are the maximum numbers we can effectively manage and allows us to group lambs of a similar weight.”

Lambs are imprint fed immediately before confinement and are fed a mix of ELMS weaning pellets that contain trace elements and grain at about 100 grams of each per head per day.

“After a settling period of 5–7 days we move the lambs onto pasture or fodder crops, but continue to supplementary feed them at the same rate for 20 days,” John said.

"This supplemented diet helps develop their rumens and boosts the immune system."

John is keen to highlight that one of the tricks lies in dividing the lambs into 'heavies' and 'lights'.

“The lights get more time (up to 12 days) in the confinement paddock."

“This enables them to develop further internally and allow them to catch up and match growth rates with the larger animals on the pastures."

John also recommends a strong planning and preparation program leading into the imprint feeding.

“We vaccinate our lambs twice — once at marking and then again at weaning with 6-in-1, vitamins A, D and E, quarantine drench and a shot of Clik across the breech and over the shoulders.”

John monitors for worms monthly with a worm test and keeps ahead of other prospective animal health issues with a rather unique approach.

“We conduct two random autopsies through the Prospect laboratories on an average lamb (one before weaning and the second five weeks after weaning) so nothing sneaks up on us."

With the support of *Sheep Connect Tasmania*, WormBoss, DPIPWE, nutrition consultants and the brains trust of producers in the Valley John is pleased with the progress he has achieved so far.

“Our approach to weaners is just a small part of the overall change in sheep management at *Norton Mandeville*,” John said.

“We have a long way to go to get to the productivity levels we desire, but the steps and protocols we have put in place definitely have us going in the right direction.”