



sheep connect

Connecting people in the sheep business

tasmania

summer 2011

What's new

Well understandably the focus for this spring has been lambing results and it is pleasing to say that the picture is pretty good across the State.

A big thank you to everyone who responded to our November e-newsletter survey (all 14 of you) and congratulations to lucky winner John Porter, *NortonMandeville*, Bothwell who will receive a free elastrator courtesy of November's survey supporter — Roberts Ltd.

Survey snapshot

Of the 13 respondents, 53.8% achieved lambing percentages (lambs marked to ewes mated) higher than 110% in their crossbred flocks. One respondent achieved their highest lambing percentage ever at 150% —well done.

More than half of the survey respondents (53.3%) joined their ewe lambs this year and 60% would consider joining them next year. It needs to be said that this approach is most likely being undertaken in crossbred flocks only. Condition score and extended joining period are the key to high conception rates in ewe lambs.

As expected, lambing percentages in purebred Merino flocks were lower than crossbreds, but still impressive, with more than 36% of respondents achieving more than 100% Merino lambs at marking.

Overall response

When asked if there was any one factor that affected this year's lambing the responses were similar. Most respondents commented that generous amounts of feed year round had lead to high conception rates. Although cold wet weather in some areas during lambing had a detrimental impact — as did campylobacter and toxoplasmosis.

The messages are clear — condition at joining is critical for high conception rates, but lamb survival is still an issue. 🐑

Contact: Andrew Bailey
M: 0408 129 373
E: andrew.bailey@utas.edu.au

Catriona Nicholls
M: 0427 571 199
E: cat.nicholls@utas.edu.au

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Proactive approach to OJD proves a winner

Bill and Robyn Gibson, *Scone*, Perth are the lucky recipients of a brand new Sekurus vaccinator gun, kindly provided by Pfizer Australia.

Bill recently responded to an online *Sheep Connect Tasmania* survey about his ovine Johne's disease (OJD) management strategies this season.

Since their flock tested positive for OJD during 2009, Bill and Robyn have taken a proactive approach to managing the disease.

This year was the fourth year of vaccinating with Gudair (although the 2008-drop had already been marked before the positive identification, the Gibsons were still able to have them as 'approved vaccinates' when they did vaccinate soon after the identification).

"We vaccinate our keeper lambs each year at marking," Bill said. "And so the 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 keepers have all been vaccinated.

"This approach will maximise the disease control by providing early protection to our ewe lambs and will eventually see our whole flock protected."

Any lambs leaving the property are heading straight to slaughter, so the Gibsons are not concerned about vaccinating these animals.

"Not being in the business of trading our sheep, our main focus is to protect the animals we have on farm," Bill said.

After participating in the recent round of *Safe and Effective Livestock Vaccination* workshops, and with their new vaccinator in hand, Bill and Robyn can rest easy that both they and their lambs can benefit from safe and effective vaccination. 🐑

Pfizer Australia Key account manager Phil Jarvie proudly handed over a brand new Sekurus vaccinator gun to lucky survey respondent Bill Gibson, *Scone*, Perth.



Better grazing management within easy reach

key points

- Stocking rate increases of up to 200% can be achieved through better grazing management.
- By understanding how plants grow and what they need, producers can increase pasture production and persistence and animal growth rates.
- Where feed is plentiful during summer, focus on keeping pastures in your best paddock in a vegetative state to maximise feed quality for the long term.

Small improvements in grazing management can lead to quantum leaps in pasture persistence, production and profits in many of Tasmanian livestock enterprises according to Basil Doonan, Macquarie Franklin.

According to Basil, producers can easily lift average annual stocking rates of around 14–15 dry sheep equivalents to 25–30DSE while boosting animal and pasture production.

“If you want the returns, you need to push the system but this means you’ve got to put in the effort and be a proactive grass manager.”

“It’s all about understanding plant morphology — what plants are there, how and when they grow, when they need grazing and when they need a break,” Basil said.

“What we see is that when we apply more pressure on pastures at the right time (and for the right length of time) pasture quality improves along with animal growth rates.”

According to Basil the key is to keep the pastures actively growing so the plant is persistent, productive and provides quality feed for as long as possible (this means keeping it in a vegetative stage).

“Many producers are distracted by things such as fertiliser, mineral supplements and alternative pasture species.”

“But in reality, grazing management is the foundation and unless you have that right first, anything you put on top is unlikely to be profitable.”

“Good grazing management means you need to know what your pastures are doing — that means regular monitoring and rotational grazing.”

“Have a good understanding of the plants you actually have in the paddock and how they grow and what they need to grow well.”

In a mixed pasture Basil suggests the key is to pick which plant you want to manage for and manage for that.

“Forget clover — focus on grass (the perennial type),” Basil recommended.

“You’ll never hurt any plant by grazing short and sharp — its about giving it time to recover.”



Photo: Catriona Nicholls

Summer is the time to clean out pastures — use large mobs to get rid of seed heads and rank feed.

Timing of grazing is based on plant morphology (leaf stage) and seasonal growth and is the key to productive and persistent pastures.

“Monitoring is critical — it is about going to the plant and seeing what its doing and manipulating that through grazing to supply the best quality and quantity of feed to the animals.”

“Feed budgeting is a must and needs to be done 3–4 months out so decisions can be made early if the season changes.”

Immediate action

At a time when many traditional pastures are not actively growing Basil stresses the importance of rotational grazing.

“The main issue for producers during early summer is to get the pastures cleaned out —get rid of seed heads and rank feed.”

“The ability to do this will be a direct function of the number of animals available or the opportunity to slash or make hay or silage.”

It is at this time of year producers may need to consider taking a hit on livestock condition in order to manage pasture quality for the longer term.

Producers looking to maintain or increase animal growth rates can keep running mobs through paddocks quickly letting stock pick the eyes out of the pasture for the next month.

But at some point they need to separate animals with higher feed requirements.

“Where pasture is plentiful and animal numbers are insufficient — don’t try to fight a losing battle,” Basil warned “Keep your good pastures in order and forget about the rest.”

“Maintain the better areas of the farm if you can’t keep up and you can’t easily boost stocking rates or cut silage or hay.”

“Defer feed and focus on keeping the best paddocks your best paddocks.”

“As these paddocks slow down, push off onto your deferred feed and use it as a feed bank, which might coincide with weaning.”

In terms of flock fertility the key is to maintain feed quality now so there is high quality feed available leading up to and during joining.

A shift in thinking

With a background in economics as opposed to production, Basil suggests that the light-bulb moment can come with a simple shift in thinking, so he encourages producers to approach the perceived challenges from a different angle.

“Don’t worry about paddock size — if the existing paddocks are large, double the mobs size.”

“The key is to understand how much feed each animal requires each day, how much feed your pasture is providing at any one time of the year and carry out a marginal analysis to decide which way to go — avoiding getting trapped by existing paradigms.” 🗨️

Contact: Basil Doonan, Macquarie Franklin

M: 0400 455 158

E: bdoonan@macfrank.com.au

The learning curve

The key to success is a group approach that sees Basil and his team work directly with their groups over a period of time — a coaching approach similar to that of Lifetime Ewe Management (see story on page 4).

“We won’t deliver the theory without the coaching component,” Basil explains.

“The whole purpose is to make a compelling argument around a better way to do things.”

“We talk about what happens with different management strategies and participants can take the decision going forward and they can continue at their own rate.”

One thing is clear according to Basil — higher management is required to drive higher stocking rates, which drives production per hectare and then profitability.

Making a change

Basil works closely with producers across the State and suggests the transition from theory to practice is important — and can be challenging for many producers.

“If we start talking about rotational grazing — they talk about infrastructure,” Basil quipped

“So we talk about higher stocking rates and they say the stock won’t do well — we say benchmarks show they do.

“We talk about mixed sex and mixed age mobs —they talk about steers riding heifers.”



Photo: Robert Healewood

Course participant Rob O'Connor, Benham Tasmania believes the process has challenged everything he knew about pastures and gave him the tools to go home and look at his system and implement changes to make it better.

“The feedback from producers who are having success in their systems is that all these perceived challenges are not really an issue.”

Our approach teaches producers to be able to work through the numbers that will drive grazing decisions — it’s a business course disguised in grazing clothes.”

“No-one will go to a business course, but 60–70% of profit is based on grazing management.”

Group approach boosts lambing results

Even seasoned sheep producers can boost lambing percentages and profits by participating in a Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) program.

Facilitated by Holmes Sackett director Sandy McEachern and veterinary consultant Graham Lean, Graham Lean and Associates, more than 60 wool and prime lamb producers across the region have spent the past 12 months brushing up on their skills in order to boost ewe conception rates and lambing percentages.

With members of the groups achieving lambing percentages in the order up to 148% for their crossbred flocks and up to 113% in their Merino flocks, the benefits of the program seem obvious.

But according to participants the group approach yields more than just increasing than lambs on the ground and higher profits.

"I've been in the farming game for more than 20 years and I relish the opportunity to be challenged and motivated by my younger counterparts," said Andrew Colvin, *Nosswick, Cressy*.

The course is run over six sessions, with each meeting offering the participants in each group to take a hands-on look at what is happening on each group members' farm. Each participant sets aside a monitoring mob and collects data across the length of the program with results shared along the way.

"I guess the pressure is on when everyone gets a warts and all look at your operation," Andrew said. "But it really makes you justify why you do things a certain way when others in the group start challenging your system."

Far from being threatening, the participants relish the opportunity for vibrant discussion and debate. And the approach provides an opportunity to walk through the recommended processes and experience the outcomes across a variety of scenarios.

Science behind program

Will Bennett, *Ashby, Ross* believes it is the science behind the program that has broadened his understanding of the practical tools.

"Seeing the figures, the graphs and the science that have been developed over time give me a greater level of confidence and understanding around the recommended practices," Will said.

"We haven't been condition scoring our ewes before joining, believing that we were across what was happening in our flock. But the science and the results from our LTEM group would suggest there are some clear ways we can improve that will really make a difference."

With a lambing percentage of 113% in his monitoring flock of Merino ewes, the results are indeed speaking for themselves.

Livestock manager Mick Burn, *Bloomfield, Ross* believes the workshops allow owners and staff to gain a joint understanding of where the business can improve.

"You think everything is going along pretty well doing what you've been doing over the years, but a program like LTEM allows your whole team to see the opportunities to make a difference through just a few small practical changes."

From an owner's point of view, Simon Foster sees great benefit in having his whole team talking the same language.

"We can walk away after the 12-month program and know we are all absolutely on the same page when we talk about conditions score at weaning," he said.

"I know after the practical component of the course my staff and I have a shared understanding of feed availability and the impact of our grazing management on ewe condition leading into joining and the importance of this on lambs on the ground come spring."

More tangible benefits

To be really worthwhile though, a program such as LTEM has to be able to make a difference to the bottom line. And according to Simon Foster, the opportunity to crunch the numbers is a key element of the success of the program.

"In addition to getting a better understanding of the science the other thing we've done is applied economics to the different aspects," he said.

"I've been exposed to the programs that don't have the economics attached, but this group process of learning and discussion has allowed us to debate and develop a robust process around the numbers."

According to Sandy, it is this process that allows producers to then determine a tailored and economically feasible plan for each season.

"The modelling on its own is not the complete answer, because every year is different and the dollars are different," he said.

"It's good for tactical decision making for varying seasons, but producers need to combine the science with what it will cost at current prices."

Back to the start

As weaning approaches, participants are now set to put into practice what they have learnt during the past 12 months.

According to Sandy the key to high conception rates are joining will be to ensure ewes are in good condition at that time — the management required to achieve this end goal that starts now.

"I would suggest that 80% of conception success is about where the ewes are at in terms of condition at joining," Sandy said.

"Maintaining ewe condition over summer and early autumn is generally much easier and more cost effective than having to supplementary feed to regain condition lost over summer."

For the next round of participants the journey has just started. And after just one meeting Jo Bradley, *Woollen Park, Longford* has already made some management changes.

"After our first meeting we have condition scored our ewes at weaning and divided the mob to allow for preferential grazing to boost condition in the lighter portion. We just hadn't realised there was the potential to increase our conception rates significantly by boosting ewe condition now and up until joining, rather than letting them coast along." 🐏

For information on current LTEM groups contact:

Catriona Nicholls
Sheep Connect Tasmania
M: 0427 571 199
E: cat.nicholls@utas.edu.au
W: www.lifetimewool.com.au



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Special offer — *Making More from Sheep* manual sale

The MMfS manual is being offered at a special sale price of \$50 including GST at www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au or contact Andrew Bailey on (03) 6336 5385. 🐏

How effective is your drench program?

This month's Sheep Connect Survey, is delving into your current drench program. For the opportunity to win a drench gun, kindly donated by this month's survey supporter — Elders — take a five minutes to answer our survey questions by going to:

W: www.tia.tas.edu.au/extensive/sheepconnect
or calling Cat on 0427 571 199

Boost shearer numbers

A batch of willing trainee shearers is ready to sharpen their blades and get some hands on experience.

If you are keen to support the Shearer/Wool Handler Training Program and keep up the supply of qualified shed staff let Project coordinator and trainer Richard Leahy know.

Richard and his students need access to a four (or more) stand shed with sheep (not lambs) for shearing and shearers quarters either available on site or nearby.

The program is jointly funded by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and skills Tasmania.

If you think you would be able to assist in this, please contact Richard Leahy. 🐏

M: 0438 265 753

E: richardleahy@live.com.au



Photo: Catriona Nicholls

Supporting shearer and wool handler training is a wise investment in the future of the Tasmanian wool industry.

Macquarie Valley field days 2011

During early December prospective ram buyers were able to have a hands-on look at the quality on offer from local Merino stud breeders.

The field day saw eight of Tasmania's finest Merino studs open for inspection including: *Trefusis, Camelford, Ashby, Winton, Barton, Mount Vernon Merinos* (Kennilworth), *Rokeyby* and *Streamshalh*.

The day was marked by the closing function at *Winton*, which saw AWI chief executive officer Stuart McCullough address producers and share his exciting view for the wool industry during the next 12 months.

The function also paid tribute to the role of Eliza Forlonge with the unveiling of a commemorative sculpture as part of the Eliza Forlonge memorial project. 🐏



Photo: Catriona Nicholls

Stuart McCullough shared the exciting opportunities for Australian fine wool in the Chinese market with field day attendees at Winton.

Stay focussed

With lambing over and crops in full swing it is all too easy to put livestock management on the back burner. Just remember that we are now in the lead up to joining and it will be much easier (and more cost-effective) to maintain condition score on your ewes up to joining than try and build condition score when little feed is available.

Weaner management

It is one thing to get high lambing rates but another to keep those lambs alive and thriving — particularly with high numbers of twins (lower individual birth weights).

Merino weaners in particular can be hard to manage over summer and some areas report fatality rates of up to 20% in Merino flocks.

Keep weaners growing at more than one kilogram per month to reduce the risk of weaner deaths.

Heavier weaners survive better — lighter weaners are at the greatest risk and are more likely to be affected by worms and other health problems.

Weaners require both protein and energy to grow — dry pastures lose quality quickly. 🐏

More information on weaner management can be found at: www.sheepcrc.org.au



useful links

- Australian Wool Innovation** www.wool.com
- Meat and Livestock Australia** www.mla.com.au
- Sheep CRC** www.sheepcrc.org.au
- LiceBoss** www.liceboss.com.au
- WormBoss** www.wormboss.com.au
- Making More from Sheep**
www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au
- Sheep Genetics Australia** www.sheepgenetics.org.au
- Australian Merino Superior Sires**
www.merinosuperiorsires.com.au
- Beyond the Bale** digital.wool.com.au
- EverGraze** www.evergraze.com.au
- Latest market information** (beef and sheepmeat)
www.mla.com.au/Prices-and-markets
- Latest market information** (wool) [wool.landmark.com.au/
daily-wool-prices-and-sales-roster/](http://wool.landmark.com.au/daily-wool-prices-and-sales-roster/)
- Latest weather** www.bom.gov.au
- FarmPoint** www.farmpoint.tas.gov.au



Ovine brucellosis-free rams available online

A new webpage is available to help ram buyers source sires that are ovine brucellosis-free (OB-free).

OB-free accreditation means that when you buy an accredited ram you can be confident the ram has a very low risk of introducing ovine brucellosis to your flock and is more likely to be fertile. It also means sheep can be conveniently entered in sheep shows within Tasmania and interstate.

Owners of OB-free accredited flocks in Tasmania have been invited to publish their flock status on the DPIPWE website — free of charge. So far, 35 of the nearly 80 accredited flocks in Tasmania are up online. Numbers are expected to rise as owners renew their membership or enter the accreditation scheme.

Entry to the scheme requires blood testing of rams and a comprehensive property management plan. Accredited veterinarians (contact details are on the website) carry out all the on-farm work and DPIPWE administers the Scheme. 🐏

For more information contact: Dr Rowena Bell, DPIPWE
E: Rowena.Bell@dipw.tas.gov.au
W: [www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/CART-6SN7UA?](http://www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/CART-6SN7UA?open)
 open and you'll find the link near the bottom of that page.

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Fax or post your details to:

Andrew Bailey PO Box 46
 F: (03) 6336 5395 KINGS MEADOWS 7249



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