

New project coordinator appointed



Welcome to James Tyson – our new *Sheep Connect Tasmania* (SCT) Coordinator.

After eight years working in agribusiness with Rabobank Australia and National Australia Bank Agribusiness, where he provided financial services solutions to Tasmanian and interstate farmers, James has joined the SCT team.

James hails from a prime lamb and cropping property at

Sassafras and has a Bachelor of Agricultural Science from the University of Tasmania. More recently, he completed a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at Curtin Graduate School of Business in Perth, Western Australia.

James is looking forward to combining his financial experience with his farming background to coordinate delivery of the latest information to Tasmanian sheep producers. He is excited about getting back 'on farm' and connecting with producers to realise opportunities the industry has to create sustainability through improved productivity and profitability.

"During my first few months I've been fortunate to meet a number of the state's leading wool producers and the Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) on-farm team," James said.

"I'm keen to continue the valuable work already being done and eager to build on existing relationships with producers and service providers across the state to ensure we can continue to be a primary source of relevant and timely information for Tasmanian sheep producers."

Previous joint coordinators, Catriona Nicholls and Andrew Bailey will continue to provide communications and technical support to the program.

Chairman of the SCT Producer Advisory Panel (PAP), Matt Dunbabin, welcomes the appointment of James to the role as the project enters its fourth phase of funding.

"It is pleasing that Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) have committed to funding SCT for a further three years," Matt said.

"This is a fantastic result, and reflects positively on the great work done during the past nine years of the project."

SCT also welcomes sheep producers Rob Tole and Kirstie Anderson to the PAP as they say thank you and farewell to Adam Stobart and John Taylor.

"It is also pleasing to see the next generation of producers on board getting involved in our industry, which has a bright future," said Matt.

Please feel free to get in touch with James with any feedback, requests for information or just to say hello. 🐏

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Timely and targeted approach

In a bid to ensure Tasmania's sheep producers are equipped with the latest news and information, *Sheep Connect Tasmania* (SCT) has increased the amount of email communication with its subscribers.

While we recognise the risk of information overload, particularly in the form of emails, SMS alerts and hard copy mailouts, SCT aims to act as a filter only sending you the best and most relevant news items.

If you don't already receive SCT communications by email and you would like to, it is as simple as:

- Typing in the following link (<http://eepurl.com/ss-ar>) to your internet browser address bar and following the instructions, or
- Scanning the below QR code with your smartphone

If you have any feedback about the content and frequency of information SCT delivers, answer our 2-3 minute survey (at www.surveymonkey.com/s/55JMPWL) and go into the draw to win one of two Performance Feeds WeatherPro for Sheep mineral supplement programs.



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Improved vaccination cuts cheesy gland impacts

Tasmanian producers could boost their returns significantly with a well-planned and implemented vaccination program according to the results of recent abattoir surveillance.

During the past 12 months, Tasmanian Quality Meats (TQM) has been working closely with Pfizer Animal Health and DPIIPWE on an awareness campaign around the economic impacts of a wider range of animal health conditions at the point of slaughter.

Preliminary results are highlighting potential gaps in on-farm vaccination programs, with cheesy gland infections showing up in almost half of all lines of sheep sent for slaughter (see Figure 1).

While the impact to consumers is non-existent, (affected portions are trimmed from the carcase and used in meat meal) the impact to producers and processors is significant.

What's going wrong

Phil Jarvie, Pfizer Animal Health, has been intrigued by the results coming through the monitoring project.

"What we would normally expect to see with an infectious disease such as cheesy gland, is an increase in incidence as sheep get older and infection spreads through a flock," he said.

"But what we are actually seeing is high rates of infection in young animals (see Figure 2)."

Although investigations into the preliminary results are in their early stages, Phil suspects the answer lies in management practices and the current nature of Tasmania's lamb market.

"What we suspect is happening is that many lambs are getting an initial vaccination at lamb marking and are then being sold as store lambs before they receive their booster vaccination; or the farmer is not using vaccines with a cheesy gland component," Phil said.

"Buyers are purchasing these lambs, possibly presuming they have had their full quota of vaccine, so the lambs are missing out on the critical booster vaccination."

In addition to seeing a high rate of infection in young animals, Phil reveals that abscesses are far more progressed than would be expected for the age of the animals.

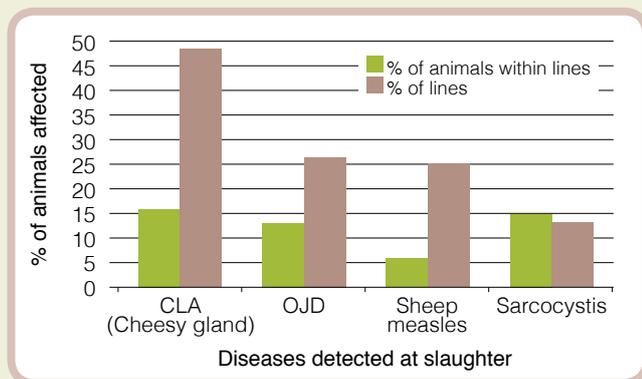


Figure 1 Sheep affected by disease at the point of slaughter

Source: Pfizer Animal Health

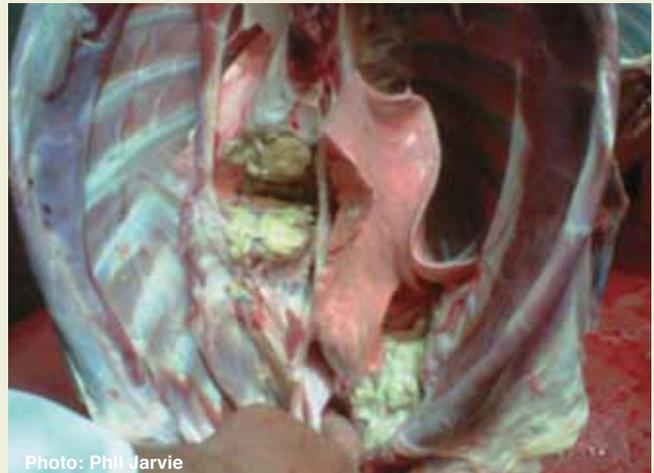


Photo: Phil Jarvie

Carcase impact: the pustular abscesses typical of cheesy gland cause significant economic impact during processing. Multiple abscesses can lead to the entire carcass being condemned.

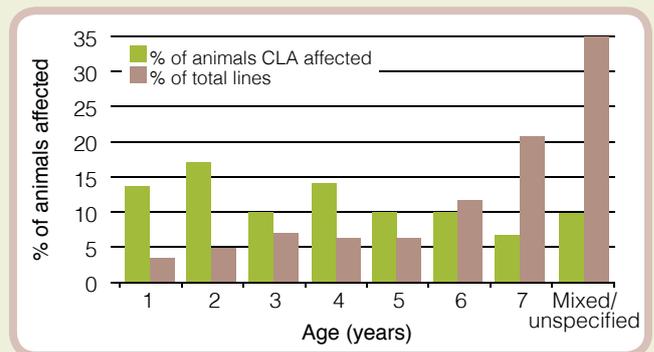


Figure 2 Rates of cheesy gland (CLA) infection by age

Source: Pfizer Animal Health

"In many cases these lambs are run in flocks where adults have not received annual boosters, which can increase the levels of exposure to bacteria when sheep are yarded or shorn. This is an ideal environment for cheesy gland to become established in young animals," he explained.

Easy fix

The good news is that the solution is simple.

"Infectious diseases like cheesy gland are relatively easy and inexpensive to manage," Phil explained.

"A well executed 6 in 1 vaccination program costs about 25c/head for each of the two initial vaccinations, and then 25c a head each year thereafter, for the life of the animal."

"In severe cases we are seeing an average trim of about four kilograms because of abscesses, at an average cost to the producer of over \$12.00 head — the cost:benefit of effective vaccination is simple."

Seeing is believing

TQM Quality assurance manager Chris Cocker encourages producers to follow a line of their own sheep through the abattoir to get a first-hand look at what is happening in their flocks.

“We welcome producers to come and have a look at what we are seeing in their sheep,” Chris said.

“Many of the diseases we are monitoring for, such as cheesy gland, sarcocystis and ovine Johnes disease are nigh on impossible to pick up by looking at the live animal.”

Dozens of producers have already taken advantage of the opportunity to visit the new export-standard facilities at Cressy and the experience has been an eye opener for many.

Sarah Cole, a beef and lamb producer from Cressy, recently attended a ‘girls’ day out’ with a group of 15 other producers and is encouraging others to make the most of the opportunity.

“The link between producers and processors is vital. To have a processor sharing with us the things that might help in the production line or reduce issues they have with quality was really important and great to hear from their perspective,” Sarah said.

“There was so much to learn in terms of vaccinations and even administering of those vaccinations and how that can affect the quality in the end.”

“The key message is to talk to your processor so you can address any issues in your operation, which in the end helps in the bottom line.”

Online support

For producers looking for easy-to-access information on how to best manage cheesy gland and other common sheep diseases, Sheep Connect Tasmania and DPIPWE have produced a range of simple two-page fact sheets that outline the key diseases, their symptoms, impacts and management options.

The fact sheets are available online at:

www.sheepconnecttas.com.au.

To enquire about joining a group tour through TQM please contact:

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Or to organise an individual visit contact:

Chris Cocker

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What is cheesy gland?

Cheesy gland (*Caseous lymphadenitis* or CLA) is a contagious bacterial disease in sheep and goats caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*.

It produces abscesses in the lymph glands throughout the body (see Figure 1).

Abscesses in affected sheep are commonly found in the crease between shoulder and neck, the flank fold and the groin area.

The pus is a typical yellow–green colour, which later dries out and becomes ‘cheesy’ looking.

Economic impact

Ruptured abscesses contaminate wool and meat of affected animals. These abscesses are trimmed out at the abattoir, reducing total carcase yield. Where multiple abscesses are present, carcasses are condemned.

Disease spread

The cheesy gland bacteria enters the blood stream, via contaminated fluid or organic matter, through unbroken skin and wounds.

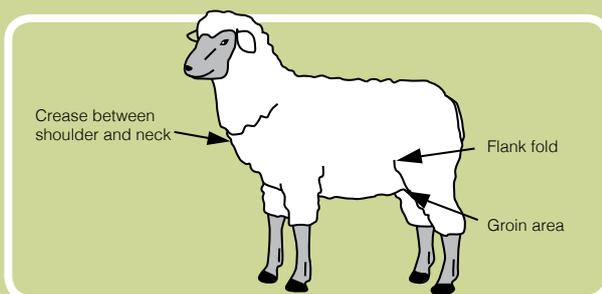


Figure 1 Common abscess sites

The most common opportunities for disease spread occur during contact with other animals at shearing, yarding, tail docking, dipping and other management activities.

Sheep with infected lungs cough onto others, infecting them directly. Sheep also can breathe in infected dust, especially in old yards.

Treatment and prevention for cheesy gland

There is no treatment for infected sheep — prevention and management is the best approach.

The recommended management options include:

- Vaccinate with a vaccine that contains a cheesy gland component.
- Treat lambs twice, at least a month apart and then administer annual boosters as adult sheep.
- Segregate any animals with open abscesses to prevent disease spread.
- Use clean equipment, yards and sheds — especially at shearing and lamb marking. Disinfect contaminated equipment, yards and sheds properly.
- Shear animals in age groups — starting with the youngest if possible.
- Release animals from yards as soon as possible to minimise time spent in close contact with other sheep — especially after shearing, dipping and marking.
- Use correct lamb marking techniques to hasten healing. Put the lambs onto clean grass. Mark the lambs in the paddock rather than contaminated yards.
- Do not plunge-dip or shower-dip infected sheep as the bacteria can live in dipping fluid and infect other sheep. Do not dip off shears.



Perennials offer security in mixed farming system

Case study: Richard and Emily Gardner
Location: Tunbridge, Tasmania
Property size: 2600ha
Mean annual rainfall: 465mm
Soils: Highly variable shallow duplex soils — sands to heavy clays
Enterprises: Mixed farming system — sheep, irrigated and dryland cropping

Photo: Catriona Nicholls

Spreading risk: In Richard Gardner's diverse mixed farming operation, a mix of resilient perennial pastures offers security across variable soil types and seasons.

key points

- Diverse enterprises including livestock, dryland and irrigated cropping (including poppies) give greater flexibility and less exposure to risk.
- Choosing pasture species has required balancing feed quality, palatability and drought resistance.
- Perennial pastures and rotational grazing have enabled about 25% of the property to be taken out of production and managed for conservation.

As far as diversity goes, Tasmania is renowned for its mixed farming systems.

Richard and Emily Gardner personify modern Tasmanian farmers with an enterprise mix that includes sheep, irrigated poppies, irrigated and dryland winter cereals and grass seed crops.

Throw into the bag an assorted range of soil types and a highly variable climate and you've got a management challenge that requires a delicate balance of a strong operations plan and timely decision making.

For Richard and Emily, a carefully chosen mix of perennial pastures offers a resilient and productive feed source that complements the livestock and cropping enterprises on their 2600 ha mixed farming property.

Diverse property

"The reasons Tasmanian farms can sustain diverse farming systems are the variable seasons and country — our properties are diverse by nature," Richard said.

"On Annandale we have native run country, with shallow ironstone soils that we largely manage for conservation values, through to fertile country ideal for livestock, dryland and irrigated cropping, including poppy production.

However, our systems haven't always been that diverse — the decline in returns from sheep forced us to look harder at other options, such as irrigated cropping.

The benefits from this process are manifold — our risk is spread across multiple enterprises and the returns from irrigation have allowed us to increase our ability to manage our native areas sustainably.

We have moved from set stocked wool production on our native country to managing most of this country for conservation values under a management covenant (a quarter of the whole property is managed for conservation outcomes).

When sheep were our major focus, every blade of grass across the property was vitally important, forcing us to extensively graze our native country.

We now graze very little of our native country and our perennial pastures are the backbone of our livestock operation.

On the flip-side, enterprise diversity has meant juggling multiple balls, and timeliness of operations can suffer.

Shift in focus

We've had to learn to be in a different business — we've grown up in conservatively managed dryland systems, where labour efficiency is paramount.

On a recent irrigation tour of northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, one of the things that struck me was

the number of farmers who are focused on a single enterprise across their entire farm — cotton for example — and because of this focus, they are really efficient.

At the end of the day our systems have greater variability and finding and managing the right mix will provide the balance between risk management and returns.

While irrigated cropping can provide lucrative returns, it is still a high-risk venture and the livestock provide a long-term risk management tool in their own right.

However, the formula of keeping it simple within each enterprise is important and our livestock enterprise is focussed on Merinos; breeding for a balance of wool and meat production.

Some of our contemporaries have gotten out of Merinos and jumped into breeding for meat production — but in this environment they will struggle; it's wool growing country.

We toyed around with incorporating a meat breed into the mix, but the benchmarks show that the dual-purpose Merino flock will provide the risk management we need while yielding a solid return.

The shift has been to move from a wool-focused breeding index to one that incorporates a stronger focus on bodyweight.

Place for perennials

As with any livestock system, the pastures are the backbone and we have developed a mix of species that offers year-round feed production (in conjunction with our crop stubbles and dual-purpose cereals), feed quality, palatability and drought resistance.

While perennial ryegrass arguably outperforms many species in terms of feed quality and palatability, it is not ideal where you have pasture grubs and highly variable seasons — it's hard to match production to stocking rates. We have the right combination of season and stocking rate in about three years in 10.

Although it is relatively low-cost and easy to establish, it outcompetes companion species if grown in a mix and disappears when things get tough — leaving nothing.

In saying that, it still plays a role in our system. We use ryegrass as a biennial pasture break in a two-year rotation with our poppies and where we have sub-optimal spring sowing conditions for our other pasture species, we can follow up with ryegrass during autumn for lower cost and risk.

In terms of resilient pasture species that will persist across variable seasons, we have had to look elsewhere.

Lesson from the drought

Drought has taught us a lot about managing pasture — conserving important pastures through sacrifice paddocks and drought lots.

It highlighted the benefits of our phalaris and lucerne as resilient, drought-tolerant species.

From a drought-tolerance perspective, we could run a phalaris-dominant system, but during the past couple of wetter seasons the challenge has been managing feed quality.

Phalaris is great, but managing growth during a big season is difficult.

Traditional cocksfoot varieties have been drought tolerant, easier to manage in terms of feed quality, but have had palatability issues.

We have been growing Uplands cocksfoot for four years for seed production and it remains drought tolerant, but is much improved in terms of palatability.

Because we are rotating sheep from pasture species to pasture species, changes in palatability can have quite an impact, particularly on young sheep. The higher palatability of Uplands means the sheep adjust more quickly.

We maintain single-species swards — each species has its own management requirements and it is easy to lose a species after a couple of years in a mixed pasture.

Lucerne is a prime example — it can be difficult to establish, particularly in a pasture mix and is not suited to all soil types.

Management challenges

It isn't that easy to manage pastures in this part of the world, because of the variability, because of the topsoils and the nature of having diverse farming systems.

Management of our pastures is probably not at the optimum as so much of it revolves around the cropping enterprises.

Pasture establishment also can be very challenging because of the risk of a dry autumn so we have moved to a spring sowing for establishing cocksfoot and phalaris.

The species mix we have means we now have the dry seasons under control, but it is the good seasons that are challenging in terms of eating the pasture effectively and controlling the dry feed — we are seeing that now.

The other issue is that because we grow pasture crops for seed, we always have dry material on top, so feed quality and grubs are a bigger challenge — which we hadn't anticipated.

Farming is always challenging, but developing a complementary mix of enterprises and finding the best pastures and crops to support those enterprises certainly helps to achieve a productive, profitable and sustainable balance.

This article first appeared in Issue 10 of *Future Farm* magazine produced by the Future Farm Industries CRC. To access *Future Farm* go to:

W: www.futurefarmonline.com.au/publications/recent-publications.htm 📄

Timely and targeted approach progresses pasture options

The Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) is investigating suitable perennial pasture options for Tasmanian producers across a number of research and demonstration sites.

Keep an eye out for a TIA pasture field day in your area to get the low-down on which species are likely to perform under your local conditions.

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Better labour efficiency lifts more than just profits

key points

- Labour is a significant business cost and efficiency means working smarter — not harder.
- Efficiency is about more than economics — it's also about attracting and keeping good staff and having a pleasant, efficient workplace.
- Increasing efficiency does not necessarily mean investing a lot of money, it is about effective planning, design and equipment.

As Tasmanian sheep operations are squeezed from every financial angle, controlling costs and boosting efficiency is the key to increased profitability.

For most sheep producers, labour is a significant cost. But according to farm consultant and Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) facilitator Graham Lean, SBSscibus, savvy producers can manage labour efficiency.

“There is an enormous range in labour efficiencies across sheep enterprises and an equally large opportunity for producers willing to scrutinise their business and implement what are often simple and inexpensive changes,” Graham said.

“Our benchmarking figures, and those of DPI Victoria’s Livestock Farm Monitor Project, reveal the average farm runs at about 7500 DSE per person.”

“But the most efficient operations are running 10,000–15,000 DSE (including contract labour and full time labour).”

“There can be up to a 2% increase in return on capital for every 5000 DSE improvement in efficiency (see Figure 1).

Measuring the cost

Graham explains that the cost of labour can be measured in two ways — as direct labour costs and indirect costs.

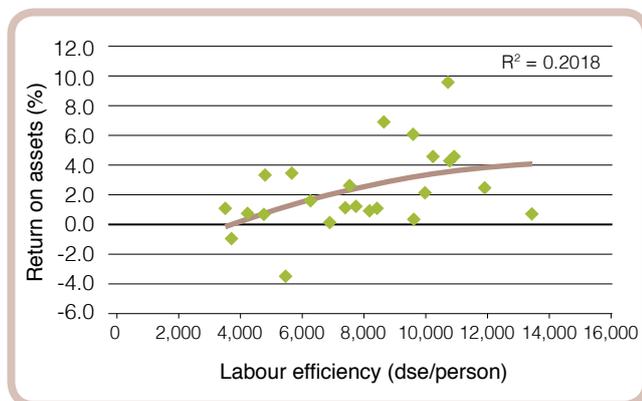


Figure 1 The impact of labour efficiency on profit

Source: SBSscibus

“The direct cost of labour is generally about \$100/ha and while it was traditionally about 20% of gross farm income recent improvements in wool and sheepmeat income have seen it fall,” Graham said.

“The reality is that cost of labour will increase as sheep numbers increase and labour supply shrinks. In the future demand for skilled labour will increase and the cost per labour unit will rise — it is a simple demand and supply equation.”

Most producers have a handle on their direct costs according to Graham, but it is often the indirect costs that yield the greatest inefficiencies.

“Strategic planning and ruthless evaluation, can identify a myriad of opportunities to improve efficiency,” Graham revealed.

“Most people don’t spend enough time evaluating and planning, and find themselves, and their staff, working under less-than-ideal conditions as a result.”

“The result is a greater need for labour, higher levels of frustration and jobs that could be done in a matter of hours end up taking days.”

“A more insidious side issue is that employees don’t enjoy their jobs, become difficult to retain and it is hard to attract labour — both permanent and contractors.”

“Most people don’t mind working hard, but get frustrated with inefficiencies reducing the quality of the work done. It’s a vicious cycle. Because you’re inefficient you don’t spend time planning and this increases inefficiencies.”

Where producers plan well and develop efficient systems, Graham sees a greater role for contract labour and a reduced requirement for full-time labour.

“Ultimately it is more efficient to pay for labour only when it is needed. There is nothing less efficient than looking for odd jobs to keep permanent labour busy.”

Golden rules of efficiency

According to Graham the principles of labour efficiency are fairly standard — design a simple system that works with your resources and not against them.

“The key is to rethink the livestock enterprise and focus on why things are done a certain way.”

- Match energy demand and to feed supply
- Evaluate fencing and stock handling systems
- Re-evaluate current flock structure (don’t underestimate the ease of management of wethers vs ewes)
- Work smarter not harder — use contract labour where possible, syndicate equipment, staff and jobs with neighbours, invest in labour-saving yard designs and handling equipment and combine operations as often as possible.

Matching demand and supply

Graham sees many producers lured by the promises of autumn lambing at the detriment of efficiency.

"In southern production systems autumn lambing can expose the business to greater risks, requires significant supplementary feeding and works against the natural system of energy demand and supply," Graham explained

"Spring lambing matches demands of both lactating ewes and growing lambs, reducing the need for labour-intensive and costly feeding."

"Pregnant ewes can be jetted for flies and lice pre-lambing, to avoid labour-intensive crutching, providing breech strike protection for up to six months, over the high risk flystrike period."

"Marking during summer has a higher potential for good weather and lower impact on growing stock."

Worthwhile investments

In addition to timing of operations, Graham suggests that a few investments have shown their potential for increased returns.

"The benefits of well-designed and constructed fencing, laneways and bugle yards have an enormous effect on efficiency," Graham said.

"And don't underestimate the value of a good dog that can work sheep well in these systems."

"I reckon producers can afford to spend \$100,000 in capital to save \$25,000 on annual labour costs — that's a 25% return on investment."

Other capital investments proving their worth are raised boards, auto-drafters, crutching cradles and electronic identification systems (EIDs).

"Research data suggests that raised boards can increase output by up to 7% and a self-pinning press can increase output by up to 11%," Graham said.

"An auto-drafter can have a significant impact in lambing operations for both prime lamb and Merino producers."

"Running stock in groups of similar weight can significantly reduce feeding and labour costs."

"It is well understood that 80% of weaner deaths occur in the bottom 20% of the mob. So by accurately being able to identify, target and feed only this portion, producers can make significant gains in profit through reduced deaths."

And while many producers claim they can accurately draft lambs by eye according to weight, the data suggests otherwise.

"We see significant financial benefits from prime lambs hitting grids through the accuracy of auto-drafting — up to \$10/hd," Graham said.

"In some situations auto-drafters have enabled a full-day's work to be carried out in one hour."

At a cost of about \$15,000, amortised over five years, producers are looking at a real cost of about 28 Merino weaners.

Data on crutching cradles suggests the benefits are both financial and logistical.

A crutching cradle allows gains in output — more than 800 animals per day per person — and flexibility in terms of timing

and the ability to combine crutching with other operations, such as jetting.

An added benefit is a smaller crutch, that increases the amount of fleece wool come shearing.

"The result is profit increases of at least \$2-3/hd through reduced costs and increased fleece yield," Graham said.

Flock structure

Graham believes it is worth evaluating current flock structure for potential gains in efficiency and impacts on profit.

"Ewe-dominant flocks chasing high meat prices can come at a labour cost," he said.

"Wethers allow more flexibility and less work in a mixed farming system and deliver less pressure during drought or fluctuations in seasonal conditions."

"Fewer lambs mean less time for mulesing, weaning and paddock preparation, while wethers are easily fed and moved between paddocks all year round."

"Lambs and lactating ewes also add to the worm burden."

Regardless of flock structure, animal health also impacts on efficiency — healthy animals require less work and stress to run.

Establishing and maintaining a rigorous animal health program to manage issues such as worms, lice, flies and footrot will reduce labour requirements significantly.

Nothing is sacred

When evaluating operations, Graham reminds producers that nothing should be sacred.

"It is really important to not just accept the way things are done as being necessary," he explained.

"It's hard to do everything perfectly, so concentrate on the critical factors and do them well."

"Combining operations can lead to significant savings — crutch, jet, drench and draft ewes at weaning, draft sheep according to condition score whenever they are in yards, particularly in autumn."

"Producers who manage according to condition score are finding they can maintain better condition across the flock with less supplementary feeding."

A labour-efficient business

With many Tasmanian producers running mixed enterprises, it is easy to fall into the trap of claiming that livestock are labour-intensive compared with cropping.

But average data from the DPI Victoria Livestock Monitor Farm Project for the past 15 years suggests otherwise. Across all farms, the average labour efficiency was 523ha/person, while cropping sits at 420ha/person.

It's all in working smarter — not harder. 🐏

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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/
- Latest weather www.bom.gov.au
- FarmPoint www.farmpoint.tas.gov.au



Photo: Catriona Nicholls



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Stay focussed

As summer draws to a close producers need to ensure their ewes and ewe lambs are in tip-top shape for joining. It is easier and more cost effective to maintain ewe condition than to boost condition that has been allowed to go backwards post lambing. Don't just assume your ewes are tracking along nicely, take the time to condition score your ewes and maximise their reproductive opportunities from the start.



Let's not let the boys off the hook. Don't underestimate the impact a dud ram can have on your overall flock fertility. Again — looking is not enough. Bring your rams into the yards and inspect their feet and testicles to ensure they are fit enough to do their job and consider vaccinating with 6 in 1.

For more information on ewe and ram management leading up to joining, go to the modules in the *Making More from Sheep* manual, available online at www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au (go to Module 10: Wean more lambs) or order a hard copy from Andrew Bailey at andrew.bailey@utas.edu.au.



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