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'It's ewe time!' in Gippsland

Exceptionally good seasonal conditions during the past 12 months have set up the potential for a bumper 2011 spring lambing on the central Gippsland property of Steve and Lisa Harrison.

But, far from being complacent, the fine wool producers are continuing to closely monitor ewe condition score, pasture quality and quantity and sheep intestinal worm burdens this winter as they seek to maximise productivity and profits from their 7000 head Merino flock.

The Harrisons are re-building ewe numbers after several years of drought on their 1200 hectare property at Giffard West.

Mr Harrison said ewe reproductive performance was central to a profitable sheep enterprise and vital in a flock re-building phase.

He said exposure to the Making More from Sheep (MMfS) program and joining a Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) group had stressed to him the benefits of ensuring ewes were in good condition at critical periods of the reproductive cycle.

Sheep producers interested in finding out more about the best practice MMfS program are invited to attend the 'It's Ewe Time!' forum in Bairnsdale on July 26.

This forum provides an opportunity to tap into latest Sheep CRC, Australian Wool Innovation and Meat & Livestock Australia sheep production information and research.

It has been found that optimising ewe reproduction potential and stocking rate can reap up to \$10/ewe in extra profits for prime lamb enterprises and \$5/ewe for Merino enterprises.

There are also positive spin-offs from greater ewe resistance to worms and improved general animal health when the breeding flock is maintained at target condition scores.

Mr Harrison said since becoming involved in MMfS and LTEM he was monitoring the condition of ewes more closely.

"My aim is to have the ewes close to condition score three at lambing," he said. To achieve this goal, pregnancy scanning is carried out and multiple-bearing ewes are run on paddocks with the best feed.

July is the toughest month with cold conditions slowing pasture growth. The Harrisons feed supplementary grain and use rotational grazing at this critical phase of the ewe reproductive cycle.

Mr Harrison said good management at lambing can boost lamb and ewe survival by up to 20 per cent, weaning rates by 10 per cent and improve lifetime wool production.

He prepares lambing paddocks to ensure high feed quality and quantity for lactating ewes.

"This year we have plenty of feed and can use agisted cattle to mow the older, drier grass down and stimulate new pasture growth in lambing paddocks ready for spring," he said.

The Harrisons wean lambs about two weeks later than the MMfS recommendation of 12-14 weeks and find ewes can easily regain condition post-weaning in preparation for the next joining.

They use top quality rams from a local breeder and feed lupins in the lead-up to joining to get the best conception results.

The Harrison's ewe and lamb survival and weaning percentages have been significantly higher than the district average and pregnancy rates were trending up.

"For example, in the last mob of 660 ewes scanned, there were 380 carrying twins and the remainder – apart from 20 dry ewes – were bearing a single lamb," he said. "Our maiden ewes had a pregnancy rate of 94 per cent this year."

Genetics also plays a key role in flock improvement and the Harrisons' local ram source has a strong breeding emphasis on increased wool cuts, reduced fibre diameter and maximum wool production per hectare.

The couple's flock has an average fibre diameter of 18.5 micron and in the most recent district benchmarks, recorded more than 15 kilograms/ha above the average wool production per hectare.

"These results give us confidence that our genetics and management are on track to getting the most out of our sheep enterprise," Mr Harrison said.

He said he was a strong believer in benchmarking their wool business to identify potential areas for improvement and learn from other producers.

The Harrisons this year topped the Gippsland Sheep Breeders Association wether trial, which measured and benchmarked the wool and carcass value of five wethers from 19 producers over three years.

The couple's wethers averaged a winning \$305.94 for three wool clips and had an average carcass value of \$108.83.

"The wether trial encourages farmers to learn from each other and allows producers to receive feedback from wool buyers," Mr Harrison said.

He said he was considering using the MERINOSELECT genetic evaluation service in future to further analyse where production gains could be made.

“It is good to keep abreast of information and new research and technology and then work out how you can use it to your best advantage in your own individual circumstances,” he said.

Mr Harrison said the MMfS manual was a valuable resource and he often used it as a reference at critical times of the year to check recommendations and assess alternative management strategies.



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