

Making More From Sheep



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'It's ewe time!' in Northern NSW

Pregnancy scanning and managing ewe nutrition are an integral part of John and Sam Hickson's Merino enterprise at Moree as they target optimal flock reproductive performance and wool quality.

The pair run 3000 Merino breeding ewes for wool production on their 8000 hectare property 'Eural' and mate a small proportion to Poll Dorset rams for opportunistic lamb sales.



Alongside the cropping enterprise, they will also feed and trade up to 1000 head of cattle to maximise returns from feed resources in a good season. Mr Hickson said his father had focused on improving the fertility of the family's Merino flock for more than 40 years and was an early adopter of ewe pregnancy scanning - having started using it about 15 years ago.

"We are continuing to ensure good fertility and high reproductive rates in our flock, but we're now also putting more effort into wool production and quality," he said.

"However, we've got to keep the numbers up and we're exploring whether it'll be cost effective for us to also run more ewes per hectare to produce more wool and more lambs."

Mr Hickson attended the Making More from Sheep (MMfS) 'It's ewe time!' forum in Goondiwindi last year and said it provided latest industry information that was both practical and common sense.

This year, a forum will be held in Tamworth on July 12 for New England and NW NSW sheep producers.

He said he is using MMfS sheep management principles for his flock, which after an autumn joining, lamb down in September for an early weaning at 12-13 weeks. MMfS recommends lamb weaning at 12-14 weeks to enable optimal ewe reproductive recovery for the following year.

The Hickson's pregnancy scan in July and 50-60 per cent of their adult ewes consistently produce multiple pregnancies each year. Annual average lamb marking rates are about 100-105 per cent. The Hickson's usually run multiple-bearing ewes separately during late pregnancy until marking, unless the season is very good, to better meet animal nutritional requirements and reduce the chances of pregnancy toxemia.

Researchers have identified this period as a critical time to maximise ewe and lamb survival rates and lifetime wool and meat production. The Hickson's property is characterised by highly variable seasons and maximising lamb survival rates is a big focus.

Mr Hickson said MMfS and Lifetime Ewe Management strategies to maintain year-round ewe condition score at about 3 should help to minimise lamb mortality.

"We've focused a lot on our pastures and grazing strategies in recent years to try to maximise production," he said.

"And after seeing the advantages of condition scoring – through the MMfS and LTEM programs – we need to improve our ability to condition score our ewes so that we can further improve our reproductive performance."

Mr Hickson said this year he was also following the MMfS recommendation to cut mob sizes down, especially around lambing.

"We're also starting to introduce some protein supplements, mostly faba beans, in the weeks prior to lambing, especially for the twin-bearing ewes and maidens."

The Hickson's aim to use genetic tools to increase clean fleece weights; the flock's adult ewes have an average wool fibre diameter of 20 micron and wool cut of 6kg/head.

Highly variable seasons can present challenges for wool quality and staple strength which can range from 30 to 50 Newtons per kilotex.

Mr Hickson said worms had been a major problem through the wet summer, forcing him to drench three times during a four month period to control Barber's Pole worms, which was highly unusual.

He said strategic worm control recommendations from the MMfS manual had been very useful and he would continue to monitor faecal worm egg counts this winter.

MMfS will host more 'It's ewe time' forums this year to provide information crucial to producers wanting to build cost efficient, easy-to-manage sheep production systems.

The forums will outline the pathways for producers to cut 10 per cent more wool, wean 10 per cent more lamb per hectare and lift carcase weights by 10 per cent.



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