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'It's ewe time!' in Longreach

A focus on management and breeding to boost flock reproductive performance, increase wool cuts and reduce fibre diameter is paying off for the Fysh family, north of Longreach.

As wool prices continue to climb to 23-year highs, the family is capitalising on higher wool production and improved fibre quality from its breeding flock of Merino ewes. David and Sarah Fysh and children Sam, Evangeline and Digby run a self-replacing Merino enterprise on their 20,000 hectare property, which has a predominantly Mitchell Downs native grass pasture base.

Flock management is largely governed by the seasonal conditions they experience north of the Tropic of Capricorn, which dictate that the end of the wet season – around late March-April – is the best time to lamb.

"We aim to lamb while grass protein levels are high going into winter, because by the end of the winter we are left with a big body of dry grass that has little protein," Mr Fysh said.

As recommended by the best-practice Making More from Sheep (MMfS) and Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) sheep production programs, the Fysh family is implementing ewe management changes to ensure a tight joining and lambing and early lamb weaning.

The overriding principle of these measures is to allow ewes to regain bodyweight quickly after weaning and get back to a high condition score in preparation for the next joining to optimise flock reproductive performance.

Mr Fysh said he used ram teasers before joining to ensure a high proportion of ewes became pregnant in three cycles and lambed within a 56 day period. Lambs were weaned aged eight to 12 weeks.

He said ewes were fed a dry lick year-round to supplement nutrients lacking in the pasture. Molasses was provided in the lead-up to joining and lambing for a nutritional 'spike' going into these critical reproductive events.

He said weaned wether lambs were retained for about 10 months and sold after their first shearing.

"If the season is poor, we turn-off wether lambs at weaning and if we get a good run of seasons, we retain wethers for wool production," he said.

"Our fundamental goal is to look after our core breeding ewe stock."

Mr Fysh said he was abreast of the latest MMfS and LTEM research that promoted maintaining breeding ewes at good condition score year-round to maximise flock reproduction and lift the amount of wool and lambs produced per hectare. He said his goal was to maintain ewes in high condition year-round, but the scale of the family's property and lack of labour limited opportunities to regularly condition score sheep.

The Fysh family is also unable to pregnancy scan ewes and run separate mobs of single and multiple-bearing ewes because of the hot, humid weather during summer when scanning would ideally take place.

"We would like to pregnancy scan and run preferential treatment mobs, but the conditions to do that here are too difficult," he said.

"Hopefully in future it will be something we can get into, but at this stage we cull all the dry ewes at lamb marking time to ensure we retain our best breeders for the long term."

Mr Fysh said changes to management practices and breeding had resulted in increased lambing rates in recent years.

Like most wool producers, the Fysh's emphasis on genetic improvement for their flock is concentrated on lifting fleece weights, reducing micron and boosting wool quality.

Traditionally the family used Riverina bloodlines. But during the past 12 years, rapid genetic gains have been made in reducing flock average micron from 23 to 19 using specially selected Queensland-bred rams.

Mr Fysh said during this period there had been a slight increase in cut per head and wool yields had lifted from about 67 per cent to 73 per cent for fleece lines.

He said he was confident in the breeding direction of his ram source, knowing the studmaster was well versed on latest industry research generated by the Sheep CRC, Meat & Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation.

The Fysh's stud source was the first Poll Merino breeding operation in Queensland to use eye muscle and fat depth scanning and this year one of its rams topped the Longreach sire evaluation trial for the majority of performance traits.

Mr Fysh said breeding advances in economically important traits, coupled with management practices promoted by MMfS and LTEM, would position him well to optimise returns from wool production in the long term.

"The goal of the MMfS program to cut 10 per cent more wool, wean 10 per cent more lambs and produce 10 per cent higher carcass weights is what I think everyone serious about the sheep industry wants to achieve," he said.

Producers interested in tapping into the latest tools and information to help them reach these targets and make the most out of the current strong sheep market can attend the one-day 'Its Ewe Time' forum in Longreach on July 15.

This forum will be presented by a team of specialists covering topics including livestock nutrition, health, reproduction, genetics and the sheep market outlook.

AWI and MLA are supported by the Event Partners - Sheep CRC, Elders, Landmark and Ruralco; and the Event Supporters - Sheepmeat Council of Australia and State Primary Industries Agencies, to deliver the forums.

Making More From Sheep is a best-practice package of information, tools and learning opportunities for Australian sheep producers funded by MLA and AWI. The website contains all the content within the Making More From Sheep program including the producer's manual and CD-Rom, and information about learning activities.

