

Making More From Sheep



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'It's ewe time!' in South Australia

Weaning more lambs and sustainably producing more wool and meat per hectare with low costs of production are the underlying goals of the Keynes family's sheep enterprise.

They are also key targets promoted by the Making More from Sheep (MMfS) program, which will hold two 'It's Ewe Time!' forums in South Australia in August – at Wudinna on August 23 and Lameroo on August 25.

Joe Keynes, wife Sally, brother Graham and his wife Melanie run a mixed medium wool, crossbred lamb and ewe breeding, beef cattle and cereal cropping operation on the 6800 hectare Keyneton Station in the eastern Mt Lofty Ranges, north east of Adelaide.



The wool flock has a 3500 head Merino breeding ewe base, an average adult fibre diameter of 20 micron and an average adult wool cut of seven kilograms per head. For the past 10 years the Keynes family has also been supplying a syndicate of three SA prime lamb breeders with first cross Merino-Border Leicester ewe lambs.

About 1500 Merino ewes are mated to rams supplied by the syndicate and ewe progeny is sold back to the breeders.

The maternal rams used by the Keynes for this supply arrangement are bred using the LAMBPLAN genetic evaluation system and have an emphasis on Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) for early growth and high milking ability.

Joe Keynes said the family continually strived to improve fertility in its Merino breeding flock, which benefitted this prime ewe lamb operation and the Merino wool enterprise.

"The key outcomes that we aim to achieve from all of our management practices are to wean more lambs and boost wool and meat production through better ewe reproductive performance," he said.

The Keynes have been making steady progress in this area. Weaning rates have increased from 80 to 90 per cent to 100-110 per cent during the past few years.

Minimising costs of production (CoP) is another of the family's key objectives and it has been involved in benchmarking its business progress in this area, as well as assisting with the rollout of the Lamb CoP program and attending a Lamb and Wool CoP workshop.

Mr Keynes said the property's CoP was in the lower percentile for the district at \$2.98/kg for lamb and \$3.10/kg for wool. He said the family highly valued the MMfS 'Wean More Lambs' module and in 2006 its local North Rhine Sheep Group held a 'Wean More Lambs' demonstration with Meat and Livestock Australia, Holmes Sackett and Rural Solutions SA.

"The strategies in that module to improve flock reproduction rates and boost lamb and ewe survival are closely aligned to what we are putting into practice on our property," he said.

"The main thing we have picked up from the MMfS package, latest Sheep CRC research and programs such as Prograze is the importance of looking after our ewes to achieve more pregnancies, more lambs on the ground and higher survival rates. "The MMfS manual is a very handy resource and I often use it as a checklist."

The Keynes regularly assess their breeding stock through the year and aim to have ewes around condition score three at critical reproductive periods, such as pre-joining, late pregnancy and lambing.

Time of lambing has changed from autumn to winter to maximise the use of high quantities and quality of feed at weaning in spring.

Native and improved perennial pastures are used to lift ewe bodyweight before joining in mid-summer and during pregnancy in autumn. Supplementary feeding is undertaken if Feed On Offer (FOO) is assessed to be sub-optimal.

The Keynes family has an emphasis on sustainable grazing. Mr Keynes is a member of the SA Natural Resource Management Council and one of MLA's environmental advocates.

He said regular FOO assessment and benchmarking was carried out during autumn and winter and sheep were split into groups and rotated around paddocks depending on condition score, feed availability, ground cover percentage, plant diversity and historic paddock records of carrying capacity.

When seasons are particularly dry, a drought feedlot system is employed to maintain ewes and preserve paddock ground cover.

This involves using small containment paddocks to reduce walking distances to feed, allow sheep to be weighed and assessed for condition and ration supplements to be fed according to requirements.

"In this way we protect the reproductive performance and wool quality of our ewes," Mr Keynes said.

He said genetic gains were focused on increasing clean fleece weight and producing elite fibre.

The family employs a specialist sheep classer to help select breeding stock for desired wool traits, strong body frame and high hogget growth rates.

"Using a classer is helping us to implement changes, including moving towards more objective measurement, use of the MERINOSELECT system and benchmarking," Mr Keynes said.

He said he would join a Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) training course this year to learn more about optimising ewe reproductive performance through genetics and management.

"I find group learning through programs such as MMfS and LTEM is highly valuable," he said.

"It's not just what you can get from the presenters, but you can also learn a lot from the other producers and from visiting other properties in your area."

Mr Keynes recently signed-up as a MMfS producer advocate for SA and he recommended local producers attend the State's 'It's Ewe Time!' forums.

He said these events allowed producers to tap into the latest sheep production research and industry tools developed by the Sheep CRC, MLA and Australian Wool Innovation.

'It's Ewe Time' Forums are aimed at producers seeking to accelerate wool and meat production by weaning more lambs, lifting carcase weights and cutting more wool and boost returns from strong market conditions.

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.



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