



# Information Exchange

The newsletter of the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network

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## Do the sums on feedlotting

FEEDLOTING lambs can be relatively simple, but not always profitable, according to Geoff Duddy, a livestock officer with NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) in Yanco.

However, a new, free software program is letting producers check their options and assess the economics of finishing lambs by using their home computer.

Geoff told a recent BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB co-ordinators/group contact conference it was crucial that lamb producers did their sums on feedlotting, to ensure they wouldn't 'blow their dough'.

"Profit margins for feedlotting can be low, so it's important to accurately estimate profitability before committing resources to this labour-intensive activity," he said. "The first question any lamb producer should ask themselves is 'Is it worth me feeding?'"

Geoff said there was increasing demand for grain-fed lamb, with the likelihood that up to three million lambs a year would be finished in commercial and opportunity feedlots in coming years, despite the return to favourable pasture conditions.

"Normally lamb finishing is quite short term, and while there can be good markets for finished



**A new web-based calculator can help producers accurately assess the profitability of feedlotting.**

lambs the margins can be small," he said.

The web-based feedlot calculator was developed by Geoff, but Dave Stanley and Steve Semple of NSW DPI have used Sheep CRC funding to produce it in its current format.

The program lets producers

enter their own production, costing and feeding scenarios to create a customised result that helps them to decide whether lot finishing is viable for them.

The calculator produces summary reports, and shows profitability and budgets for various production scenarios.

### FACTS OF THE MATTER

#### Take home messages

- Consider alternatives to grain finishing or lot feeding – is it your most-profitable option?
- Test all ration components.
- Design a cost-effective, balanced ration.
- Feed to a lamb's need.

#### Best practice indicators

- Wean and pre-train lambs to grain by 14 weeks of age.

- Monitor lamb weights and fat scores before and during feeding.
- Use a balanced feed ration.
- Use sound husbandry and environmental management practices within the feedlot.
- Use the Sheep CRC Feedlot Calculator to estimate the cost of production, profit margins and value-adding potential of a feedlot program.

Geoff said producers needed to understand the financial risks involved with feedlotting lambs. The program calculates margins and break-even prices for finished lambs, cost of liveweight gain and return on capital.

"There is a base cost of production calculator and a more advanced version that allows producers to use several feedlot rations based on nutrition information," he said.

"The program can be used by those who have no experience of lot feeding, as well as semi-professional and professional lot feeders."

The Sheep CRC feedlot calculator can be downloaded by going into the CRC website at [www.sheep.crc.org.au](http://www.sheep.crc.org.au) and typing 'feedlot calculator' in the box below the picture of the kelpie.

Geoff is planning to run a series of workshop in Victoria in coming months to help lamb producers work through the program and look at their options.

*For more information on the program or the planned workshops, phone Geoff Duddy on (02) 6951 2688 or 0427 007 490, or e-mail [geoff.duddy@dpi.nsw.gov.au](mailto:geoff.duddy@dpi.nsw.gov.au).*

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# Planning helps minimise stress

HEALTHY sheep, good ground cover and minimising stress on the family were the aims of the Shea family at Ararat when it became clear that the 2006 spring would be a failure.

Debbie and Rob Shea are associate members of BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB and run a fine wool Merino stud across two properties, in conjunction with Rob's mother, Marg, and their two children, Jon 20 and Jenni 17.

Debbie was a keynote speaker at the recent Bounce Back from Drought forum in Ararat run by Australian Wool Innovation and Meat and Livestock Australia. She explained how her family had dealt with the drought.

## People a priority

"One thing that was very important for us was to look after the people in the business," Debbie said. "This over-riding goal meant we made decisions that were different to those we had made in previous droughts.

"In previous droughts we learnt we could keep sheep alive by grain feeding, this time we decided to feed all our stock and feed them well. We probably overfed our sheep to keep them in condition score 3+, but the end result was less stress on the livestock and less stress on us. Seeing sheep in good condition was important for our morale."

## Previous experience

When the 2006 spring failed to deliver rain, the Sheas made an effort not to panic, but rather draw on their previous experience.

"At the start, the emotion was overwhelming, because we felt we were losing control, but in reality we had been through tough seasons



Experience has taught Debbie Shea that it is as important to look after the people in a farm business during a drought as it is the livestock.

before and had the experience and skills to deal with it," Debbie said.

"The key to managing the situation was research, planning and then acting."

Rob and Debbie went through the farm diaries and records from previous drought years and planned an approach to 2006/07.

The first step was to set out a feed budget and secure feed by buying grain futures and taking options to secure supplies at a set price.

"We don't grow feed, so we looked at what we used in the 20002/03 season and based our requirements on that," Debbie said.

"While, in hindsight, it wasn't enough, the fact we had put things in place and made decisions meant we tried not to get stressed and instead focused on what we were setting out to do.

"We spoke to our accountant and bank, used Farm Management Deposits and then

spoke to our suppliers so that we had a good working relationship with them from the start. We also spoke to the local abattoir about prices and supply for mutton sheep and decided on making no extra stock sales."

The Sheas kept all family members informed of their decisions and planned to take time out from the farm, such as weekends away.

This meant there was an increased reliance on their two children to help out when Debbie and Rob needed time off.

## Feeding and drenching

Sheep were contained in sacrifice paddocks with good shelter and water, and a drench program was put in place, but only for young sheep and weaners introduced into the paddocks. Adult sheep were drenched according to faecal egg counts over summer.

The weaners were dropped in August and September and were imprint fed while on the ewes.

After weaning they were fed a mix of lupins, barley, lime and a vitamin supplement. They were also rotationally grazed across paddocks that were selected in spring as having good water and pasture and then locked up for summer grazing.

"Our aim with the containment areas was to maintain pasture cover, protect the soil and have pastures ready to respond to rain," Debbie said. "We were lucky, because we had heavy rain over summer that filled dams and enabled us to let our ewes out in groups for joining."

The Sheas also decided not to take on new projects, to reduce the chance of unexpected financial or emotional pressure.

"The last thing anybody needed during the drought was a surprise," Debbie said. ■

## Profitable sires

WHETHER you breed or buy first cross ewes, their sires have a huge impact on the profitability of prime lamb production.

A major research project across three States evaluated the progeny of 91 maternal sires and found that among Border Leicesters, the main breed represented, the best individual sires produced crossbred daughters with a gross margin per ewe per year \$41 higher than the worst performers.

This compared with an average difference across breeds of \$19 per ewe per year.

The Maternal Central Progeny Test Project evaluated the major maternal breeds, including Border Leicester, East Friesian

and Coopworth. It was funded by Meat and Livestock Australia, with the support of the NSW and Victorian Departments of Primary Industries and SARDI.

The research found that breed choice was not the most important factor; rather the individual sires used had the biggest implications for financially successful crossbreeding for prime lamb production.

While producers can choose the breed that suits their conditions, the researchers urge people to choose their rams on their genetic merit within the breed using Australian Sheep Breeding Values or selection indexes from LAMBPLAN.

# Crops provide free winter feed

WINTER CEREALS are an untapped source of grazing that can substantially boost winter feed supplies, according to Grain and Graze research.

Trials have shown cereals can be grazed at strategic times over winter with no reduction in subsequent grain yield, according to Grain and Graze Corangamite and Glenelg region co-ordinator, Cam Nicholson.

In fact, some trials have showed grazing at key times may boost grain yields at harvest.

Speaking at a Hesse BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB meeting, Cam said cereals effectively provided a free source of feed, given that money had already been invested in crop establishment.

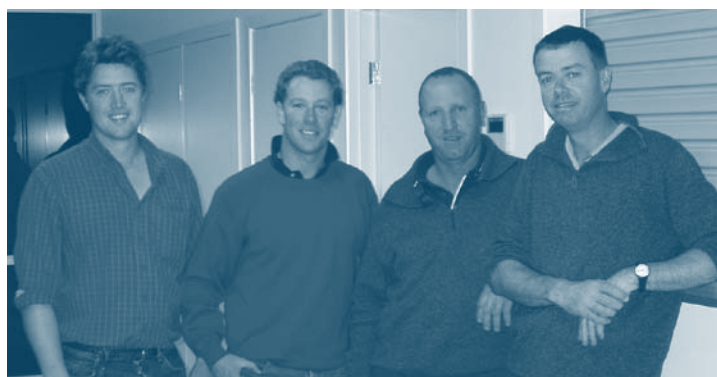
The Grain and Graze research shows:

- any cereal can be grazed, not just dual-purpose varieties;
- grazing needs to take place between sowing and the GS 30 stage of cereal development;
- cereals can be grazed hard and early, once the plants are well anchored;
- strategic grazing generally has no grain yield penalty; and
- the feed produced by grazing cereals involves no additional costs.

Hesse group member Tom Whinney is part of a team that manages 15,000 Merinos and 1700ha of cropping on Warramben near Shelford. He is excited by the potential of grazing cereals.

“Controlled grazing of cereals could provide us with free feed at a time when we are often short of feed in the lead up to lambing,” he said. “We lamb from August 20 onwards and if we can graze our cereals with joined ewes then we could let our lambing paddocks get away. This year I’m keen to give it a go by grazing 140ha triticale, 150ha barley and 100ha of red wheat.”

The crucial factor in the successful grazing of cereals is being able to accurately identify



**Hesse Group co-ordinator James Whale and members Tom Whinney and Denis Banks with guest speaker Cam Nicholson.**

when cereals are about to hit the GS 30, as grazing plants after this stage dramatically cut grain yields, Cam said.

“The GS 30 stage of cereal development is when stem elongation starts. This stage can occur at between 60 and 130 days after sowing, depending on the variety,” Cam said.

“The only way to successfully identify if a plant had reached GS 30 is to dissect the main stem, to see if ear formation has occurred at the base of the stem. At GS 30 the tip of the embryonic ear is no further than 1cm from the based of the stem.

## THE FACTS OF THE MATTER

Work by Grain and Graze has shown all winter cereals can provide a source of winter feed for livestock, not just dual-purpose varieties.

Cereals can be grazed with no detrimental impact on grain yields, as long as grazing is completed up until the main tiller reaches GS 30.

Dissecting the main tiller of the plant can only identify the GS 30 stage.

Grazing after GS 30 risks damage to the emerging seed head and dramatically reduces grain yields.

Southern Farming Systems will run grazing trials on seven varieties of wheat, barley and triticale commonly grown in south-west Victoria and investigate both animal and crop performance.

For more information, phone Cam Nicholson on 0417 311 098.

“Plants can go from GS 30 to the next stage quickly. If you get the timing of grazing wrong then you can have serious damage to the emerging ear and severely cut grain yields.”

Trials by Grain and Graze found that cereals provided around 600-700kg/DM/ha of grazing just 50 days after sowing. This cover can be grazed hard, down to 200-300kg DM/ha and recover.

With different varieties, some cereals could grow up to 2000kg/DM/ha or more before the crop reaches the GS 30 stage.

A number of trials have found that in some cases crop yields actually increased after grazing before the GS 30 stage, when compared with ungrazed crops.

Cam said this increase in yield might be the result of the reduced leaf area using less soil water in a dry year and reducing the incidence of crop diseases. There was also a lower incidence of lodging in grazed barley.

Grazing delayed ear emergence by 7-10 days, reducing the risk of frost damage in grazed crops.

A number of trials on the potential of grazing cereals are being run this season by Southern Farming Systems. They will look at animal and crop performance and involve grazing seven varieties of wheat, barley and triticale commonly grown in south-west Victoria. ■

## AT A GLANCE

### Nuffield Scholarships

*BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB members wanting to expand their agricultural knowledge by travelling overseas should consider applying for a Nuffield Farming Scholarship.*

*The Australian Nuffield Farming Scholars Association awards scholarships to farmers with the aim of increasing practical farming knowledge and management skills, and broadening people’s understanding of*

*agricultural issues and opportunities in a global context.*

*Scholars can travel to study farming practices in Europe, Asia and North America or those countries best suited to their chosen topic.*

*You do not need academic qualifications, but will need to persuade the selectors that you have the qualities to make the best use of the opportunity provided by the scholarship. Applications close June 30.*

*For advice about a possible topic or additional*

*support, phone Australian Wool Innovation on (02) 9299 5155. For more information about the scholarships visit the Nuffield Scholarship website at [www.nuffield.com.au](http://www.nuffield.com.au) or phone (02) 6964 6600.*

### Newsletter Contributions

*WE are keen to hear suggestions for this newsletter and are happy to take contributions. Phone Annette Taylor on 5355 0531.*

# Time to shape our network's future

FINALLY, a chairman's report that can be written when there is mud, rather than dust, as the norm for most regions of the state, along with some inflow for the catchments. The Jamieson River is flowing and Lake Eildon's level has lifted a couple of metres over the past few days. That's seriously great news.

On May 30 and 31 we held our co-ordinators and group contacts conference at Trawool near Seymour.

The conference was a great opportunity for group contacts and our team of co-ordinators to meet and discuss what other groups are doing across the state.

This gathering also gave the Advisory Committee the chance to collect vital information about how we can construct a business



**Jamie Ramage,**  
chairman,  
BESTWOOL/  
BESTLAMB

plan that is appealing to funders during our next funding round.

I must thank the facilitators, Jason Trompf and Martin Dunstan, who conducted the sessions that collated the information gathered at your SWOT analysis meetings about BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB. This feedback is critical if the Advisory Committee is to successfully negotiate for funding on your behalf.

What was clear from the feedback was that 'groups' and

facilitated meetings with peer support were important for helping members through good times and bad.

Successfully managing drought and practice change depends on having the necessary skills and support. Group members felt that the BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB network supplied this through our non-threatening environment and helped to empower people in the process of change.

I cannot recall a time when there has been so much in the way of education and support available to Victorian farmers. BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB took advantage of this opportunity and invited a range of providers to present what they had to offer to our Trawool conference.

We also had a representative from Centrelink outline the

support packages available, such as the Professional Advice and Planning Grant and Farm Help. Phone Centrelink on 132 316 for further information about these packages.

During the past 12 months, the Advisory Committee has studied several options for restructuring the program. This has been forced on us by uncertainty about the future of funding.

It is clear that post June 2008 we will have less money to fund our activities if we do not change our approach to funding and whom we seek it from. With this in mind, we need more suggestions about how to better market BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB to other farmers. If you have any ideas, please contact Annette Taylor, Lyndon Kubeil or Jamie Ramage. ■

## SMOKO ...

### Sounds like a case of football boot in mouth

- "Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein," *Mick Malthouse, Collingwood coach.*
- "I'm going to graduate on time, no matter how long it takes," *Peter Bell, Fremantle, about his university law studies.*
- "You guys line up alphabetically by height" and "you guys pair up in groups of three, then line up in a circle," *Barry Hall, Sydney captain, at training.*
- "I can't really remember the names of the clubs that we went to," *Brock Maclean, Melbourne, on whether he visited the pyramids during his visit to Egypt.*
- "He's a guy who gets up at six o'clock in the morning, regardless of what time it is," *Kevin Sheedy, Essendon coach, on James Hird.*
- "It's basically the same, just darker," *Jonathan Brown on night versus day grand finals.*
- "I told him, 'Son, what is it with you, is it ignorance or apathy?' He said, Barass, 'I don't know and I don't care'," *Ron Barassi talking about Gary Cowton.*
- "I want to kick 70 or 80 goals this season, whichever comes first," *Barry Hall, Sydney, when asked about the upcoming season.*
- "Chad had done a bit of mental arithmetic with a calculator," *Mark Williams, Port Adelaide coach.*
- "We actually got the winning goal three minutes from the end, but then they scored," *Ben Cousins, West Coast Eagles.*
- "I've never had major knee surgery on any other part of my body," *Luke Darcy, Western Bulldogs.*
- "I owe a lot to my parents, especially my mother and father," *Shane Wakelin, Collingwood.*
- "Sure there have been injuries and deaths in football, but none of them serious," *Adrian Anderson.*
- "If history repeats itself, I should think we can expect the same thing again," *Andrew Demetriou, AFL CEO.*
- "I never comment on umpires and I'm not going to break the habit of a lifetime for that prat," *Terry Wallace, Richmond coach.*
- "Have you ever thought of writing your autobiography?" *Garry Lyon, commentator. "On what?" David Swartz, Melbourne.*
- "Strangely, in the slow motion replay, the ball seemed to hang in the air for even longer," *Dermott Brereton, former player, now commentator.*



BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB is a co-operative program for wool and lamb producers seeking to boost their farm profit and productivity.

For information about the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network, phone (03) 5355 0531, e-mail [bestwool@vff.org.au](mailto:bestwool@vff.org.au) or visit [www.bestwool.com](http://www.bestwool.com)