



Information Exchange

The newsletter of the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network

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Greater diversity in a decade

TEN YEARS ago, BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB member Rick Robertson's farm business looked very different from the way it looks today.

Changing commodity prices and ongoing dry seasons have resulted in changes to the enterprise mix on the 1000ha family farm, Gracemere, at Bengworden in East Gippsland.

A passion for Merino wool has meant Merino sheep are still part of the mix, but the farm system in 2008 is far more flexible than it was in 1998.

"Ten years ago, we were a 100% Merino property producing 19.5 micron wool," Rick says. "We had up to 3000 commercial Merino ewes, ran wethers until they were five years old, had a stud of 700 ewes and sold around 100 rams a year. The whole farm was down to pasture.

"We still run Merinos, but our enterprise mix today is more diverse."

Pasture cropping

The Robertson property is now 40% cropped, of which a third uses the 'pasture cropping' technique of direct drilling cereal crops into summer active, winter



BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB member Rick Robertson has changed his enterprise mix, but still sees a place for productive, easy-care Merinos.

dormant pastures developed by Colin Seis of NSW.

The farm runs 2700 Merinos ewes. Just over a third are joined to terminal sires, with the balance put to Merinos.

"Ten years ago I would never have thought there would be a terminal ram on the place, but now we turn off July/August drop crossbred lambs at 10-11 months," Rick says. "They're hard to keep in, but we can graze them on stubbles and it fits in well with the cropping program."

All the cropping work is done

by contractors, which means:

- hundreds of thousands of dollars in machinery is not sitting idle for months on end, and
- the Robertsons can easily go back into more stock if circumstances change.

Flexible stocking

Merinos ewes also make use of the cropping by grazing winter wheat over May, June and July.

Merino wethers are now sold before they turn two and the difference in stocking rate

has been effectively replaced by opportunistic dairy cattle agistment.

Up to 700 dry dairy cows from around Maffra come onto the property over winter, but numbers vary depending on the season.

Rick has also had beef cattle on agistment and is considering steer trading in the future.

"When we just ran Merinos we were effectively fully stocked all the time, which was okay when we had reliable rainfall," he says.

Drier seasons

"We used to have an annual average 600mm rainfall, but we've only averaged 400-450mm in the past nine years, largely due to failed springs.

"In dry seasons we found we had an unsustainable system – we had to rely on bought-in grain to feed the sheep and were getting bare ground and increasing the risk of erosion.

"Changing the enterprise mix has spread the risk, given us flexibility with stocking rates, and confirmed that cropping and grazing are complementary.

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Good genetics pay

TRIALS BY Sheep Genetics have consistently shown that rams with Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBV) for a high post-weaning weight sire lambs with high growth rates.

Richard Apps from Sheep Genetics said producers wanting to target specific markets could get big improvements in the performance of their lambs by using the most appropriate terminal sires.

"ASBVs produced by Sheep Genetics for objectively measured terminal sires let ram buyers have a good appreciation of the genetic merit of each animal across a range of characteristics and compare rams across breeds," he said.

"Animals are measured for a range of characteristics, such as fat cover, eye muscle diameter and growth rate at post-weaning – or 7½ months.

"There are also a range of measurements for traits that are not visible in adult animals, such as birthweight, worm egg counts and staple strength.

"The ASBVs take into account the environment the animal has been raised in and factors such as birth date and if the animal was a multiple or single lamb.

"The end result is figures that can help breeders select rams that are best suited to breeding the animals they want."

A recent large-scale trial involving 2000 crossbred ewes joined to high, medium and low post-weaning weight (PWT) terminal sires

Table 1: Percentage of lambs 43kg plus at 16 weeks.

Sire group	Av PWT of sires	% of lambs >43kg
High PWT	8.9	46.6
Mid PWT	4.4	18.0
Low PWT	1.6	11.6

demonstrated the effectiveness of the ASBV values (See Table 1).

Lambs sired by high PWT rams gained 50g/day more than lambs from the low PWT sires.

At 16 weeks of age that was the equivalent of an extra 2.5kg in carcase weight, which if valued at \$3.5/kg, was worth an extra \$8.75 per lamb. ■



Greater diversity in a decade

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Direct drilling using pasture cropping means we always have more groundcover.

"We have also established a 10ha saltbush plantation that is rotationally grazed by ewes over summer and autumn to take the pressure off the pastures."

The Merino stud still operates – albeit on a smaller scale – and the commercial Merino flock's breeding objectives have changed.

The emphasis is now on easy-care, plain-bodied, long-stapled sheep. The aim is to get a good wool cut, greater body weight, increased fertility and reduced flystrike.

This year's drop of Merino lambs was not muled.

"Many years of fleece weighing have repeatedly shown the long-stapled types

out-cut the old-fashioned, wrinkly, short-stapled sheep and are naturally better doing. They will also be much more user friendly when mulesing stops," Rick said.

Any ewes with heavy, tight, wrinkly skin and a small frame are joined to terminal rams.

"We are putting a lot more emphasis on fertility now than we did in the past because in the current market it is the key profit driver in allowing us to sell more wethers and lambs," Rick says.

"The cropping gross margins (including fattening sale sheep) are often four times higher than wool growing, but, despite this, we feel the current enterprise mix is right considering our erratic rainfall pattern and soil types." ■

AT A GLANCE

A step ahead

CHANGE isn't new to farming – but the pace of change is quickening. Sometimes change can feel like pressure, and sometimes things are uncertain, but change can also bring about innovation, new technology and new opportunities. Today the best farm businesses are sophisticated, productive and profitable enterprises willing to explore new ideas and adopt new practices.

A Step Ahead – Stories of Farming Life is a DVD that tells the stories of Victorian farming families who have tackled the current challenges and opportunities with optimism.

A free copy of the DVD is available from the DPI Customer Service Centre by phoning 136 186.

Parasite options online

EACH month, up to 2000 Australian producers visit the WormBoss® site, and as many as 300 producers visit the LiceBoss™ website, to better understand the effects of worms and lice on their sheep

WormBoss is all about cutting back on unnecessary drenching and minimising the onset of drench resistance, while lifting animal productivity and profitability.

LiceBoss™ guides woolgrowers through the complex process of deciding what to do when they discover lice on their sheep – when to shear, when to treat and with which product.

For more information visit www.liceboss.com.au and www.wormboss.com.au

Help identify the black sheep

RAM breeders can help detect one of the genes responsible for recessive black pigmentation in sheep by taking part in an online survey run by SheepGenomics.

This DNA-based test follows CSIRO Livestock Industries' identification of the Agouti gene variants that cause white and black sheep. The final aim is to develop a new test capable of identifying the majority of Agouti carriers.

The survey can be accessed through the AWI web site. Go to AWI home page and select Breeding from the header.

Newsletter contributions

WE are keen to hear suggestions for this newsletter and are happy to take contributions. Phone Jane Court on 5735 4351.

Hay and silage give cropping return

CUTTING CROPS for hay and silage this season has worked out well for central Victorian farmer John Kelly.

John, a member of the Euroa BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB group, runs first cross ewes, Angus cattle and crops on his property near Euroa.

This year John opted to cut wheat, canola and triticale crops when the season cut out early.

The decision meant John was able to conserve the crops when feed quality was high and he still had time to direct drill some of the cut canola paddocks with millet in November to capitalise on any subsequent rain to produce feed.

“Our crops were struggling and were starting to wilt back in August,” John says.

“We had no rain to speak of in September and October and a severe frost as well. Things weren’t looking good and we needed to make a decision. We decided to cut our crops for hay and silage and I’m very happy we did.”

Group meeting

John ended up cutting 78ha of wheat, 29ha of triticale and 57ha of canola after a BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB group meeting was held on his farm to talk through the options. Crops of earlier sown wheat varieties were left for grain.

Group co-coordinator Kate Sargeant said a number of other group members were in the same situation as John, with more than half the 22 farms in the group involved in some cropping.

“The crops had all looked good earlier in the season, but then the rain stopped in September and October,” Kate says.

“Everyone with crops was in the same position in October, and was asking if they should cut their crops or take them through for grain.”

Kate contacted DPI cropping agronomist Dale Grey at Cobram, who was able to give the group some guidance with working out potential crop yields given the season and the likelihood of further rain.

Yield predictions

His figures were based on crop yield predictions for wheat, canola, barley and peas in the Miepoll area and took into consideration the low rainfall for the season and the expected rainfall for October.

“The whole region was in Decile 1 for rainfall at the time of the meeting, so we assumed this would be likely to continue,” Kate said.



John Kelly shows members of the Euroa BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB the canola crop that was eventually cut for silage.

The group went through the exercise of comparing the economics of cutting a canola and triticale crop for either hay or silage or harvesting the crops for grain.

The first step involved taking at least four samples of the crop across two rows by 50cm with the crops cut at harvest height. The samples were then dried to give an estimate of dry matter production.

These figures were then put into Dale’s equation to give an estimate of the crops’ hay or silage yields (assuming 85% dry matter for hay and 50% dry matter for silage).

Spreadsheet

Kate created an Excel spreadsheet that used the yield estimate to look at the gross margins of the various grain, hay or silage options with differing yields.

The spreadsheet allowed each person to put in their own figures for phosphorous and potash fertiliser costs, hay and silage making costs, and bale weights, as well as estimates for the energy and dry matter contents of the hay, grain or silage, and the market prices for all three.

It then produced a set of gross margins for all three harvest options against a range of differing yields for each farm.

When John’s canola crop was subsequently cut for silage, the yields were somewhat lower than anticipated.

“It goes to show just how important it is to take a number of samples that reflect the all-over crop,” Kate says. “Canola can be pretty patchy, so it’s not unexpected to get a variable yield across the paddock.”

Best return

While the canola crop’s silage yield was down, John says cutting the crop gave the best financial return.

“One person in the group thought I was mad to cut the canola, but when we went back to the paddock after sowing the millet, we inspected a patch of uncut canola that we had left. There was very little seed in the pods, and it was frosted and shriveled.

“It wouldn’t have paid to harvest it for grain. By cutting the crop, I’ve got feed I can either sell or use on the farm, and I freed up the paddock, which is now growing millet.”

THE FACTS OF THE MATTER

A NEW gross margin calculator is available on the BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB website which can help people weigh up whether they should harvest a crop for grain or cut it for hay or silage.

The calculator was tested by the Euroa group this year and used by group member John Kelly who decided to cut a number of crops for hay and silage.

John’s decision to cut some crops early ensured he baled good quality feed and allowed him to direct drill millet into some of the paddocks.

For more information visit the BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB website at www.bestwoolbestlamb.com.au, or contact Kate Sargeant, phone 5735 4352 or e-mail kate.sargeant@dpi.vic.gov.au

Watch for our new-look website

THE END of another year looms, and 2008 will certainly be remembered as a defining period of change for Australian agriculture, as well as for the entire planet.

We can only hope that we see some great decisions and strong leadership from our political representatives.

BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB is also moving with the times.

An updated website is being developed that will bring to our members new opportunities and progressive information.

One of the most interesting features will be the Forum, which will allow farmers to communicate topical issues or concerns and utilise the vast



Jamie Ramage,
chairman,
BESTWOOL/
BESTLAMB

skills and knowledge of the wider farming community.

The Forum page will promote discussions about topical issues and enable producers to pose questions and answers about issues of interest.

Visitors to the site wanting access to the Forum will be able to register as an Associate member online and in that way

they will be able to access the Forum, along with BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB members.

The Tools section will be a warehouse for decision-making computer models.

These tools will be able to help you with the day-to-day calculations that need to be made in a farming enterprise.

Each tool has a short description about its contents and the decision it can help with, such as feed budgeting.

The website will also provide increased opportunities for across group interaction, with each group able to list its activities in the Events area.

In that area each group will provide a monthly rundown

of its coming events, providing an opportunity for others to be involved its activity, at the group's discretion.

This will also be where phone seminar recordings can be found and downloaded.

The News section will hold all the news generated by BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB, such as the Newsflash, the *Stock & Land* articles and this newsletter.

There is something for everyone at www.bestwoolbestlamb.com.au. Bookmark the site and then watch it develop, become aware of its features and use its facilities.

I wish everyone a happy Christmas and a happy and prosperous 2009.

SMOKO

The duck ...

A DUCK walks into a pub and orders a pint of beer and a ham sandwich.

The barman looks at him and says, "Hang on! You're a duck".

"I see your eyes are working," replies the duck.

"And you can talk!" exclaims the barman.

"I see your ears are working, too," says the duck. "Now, if you don't mind, can I have my beer and my sandwich please?"

"Certainly, sorry about that," says the barman as he pulls the duck's pint. "It's just we don't get many ducks in this pub. What are you doing round this way?"

"I'm working on the building site across the road," explains the duck. "I'm a plasterer."

The flabbergasted barman cannot believe the duck and wants to learn more, but takes the hint when the duck pulls a newspaper from his bag and proceeds to read it.

The duck reads his paper, drinks his beer, eats his sandwich, bids the barman good day and leaves.

The same thing happens for two weeks.

Then one day the circus comes to town.

The ringmaster comes into the pub for a pint and the barman says to him, "You're with the circus, aren't you? Well, I know this duck

that could be just brilliant in your circus. He talks, drinks beer, eats sandwiches, reads the newspaper and everything!"

"Sounds marvellous," says the ringmaster, handing over his business card. "Get him to give me a call."

The next day, when the duck comes into the pub, the barman says, "Hey Mr Duck, I reckon I can line you up with a top job, paying really good money."

"I'm always looking for the next job," says the duck. "Where is it?"

"At the circus," says the barman.

"The circus?" repeats the duck.

"That's right," replies the barman.

"The circus?" the duck asks again. "That place with the big tent?"

"Yeah," the barman replies.

"With all the animals who live in cages and performers who live in caravans?" says the duck.

'Of course,' the barman replies.

'And the tent has canvas sides & a big canvas roof with a hole in the middle?' persists the duck.

"That's right!" says the barman.

The duck shakes his head in amazement and says ... "What the bloody hell would they want with a plasterer??!"



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 or visit www.bestwool.com