**Queensland Government**

**Department of Agriculture and Fisheries**

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**Grain feeding lambs: tips for getting it right**

Queensland producers opting to grain feed lambs should ‘lock in grain supplies and set up forward contracts’ to minimise risk and increase returns, according to a sheep and wool adviser.

Geoff Duddy from Sheep Solutions was a guest presenter at Leading Sheep workshops at Augathella and Bollon recently, advising on management strategies to minimise supplementary feeding, reduce production costs and boost income.

Leading Sheep is a joint initiative of Australian Wool Innovation and Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland, with support from AgForce, which assists in decision-making about technologies and practices that can increase the profitability and productivity of Queensland sheep businesses.

He said high store lamb prices had made feedlotting ‘reasonably risky’ but there were margins for producers who did their planning and preparation.

The private consultant, who has more than 25 years’ industry experience, urged producers to consider store and trade lamb prices, as well as seasonal conditions, access to grain and prices, and distance to market before feedlotting.

He said step one for those breeders intent on grain-feeding was exposing lambs to feed and feeding equipment before they were weaned.

“In the week to 10 days prior to weaning you can feed 50 to 100g per ewe per day of a shotgun mix of a variety of grains,” Mr Duddy said.

“If you are intent on finishing your lambs you need to do this, as it encourages rumen development, and ‘imprints’ or teaches the lamb to recognise and accept grain quicker.”

But he said background elements like genetics, nutrition and management played a part in lamb weight gains on feed (conversion rates). It was these elements, he emphasised, that breeders needed to focus on as they were readily influenced at a property level.

“Speed of lamb turn off will be influenced by genetics and nutrition and producers can generally make money by investing in better genetics.

“Investing in quality genetics, for example buying in better performing rams based on Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) could easily equate to an extra $10 to $15 per lamb annually.”

For those buying-in lambs, Mr Duddy said a key consideration was the cost and weight of lambs at purchase.

“Whether you are a breeder or buying in lambs to finish on grain the key aspects of the enterprise are minimising risk, optimising production and maximising profit,” he explained.

“Feedlotting involves financial risk. The main risks are lamb deaths, non-feeders, poor growth rates and unexpected changes in feed costs or market prices.”

He said to reduce risks producers could:

* Ensure they had adequate feed stored on farm
* Have a prearranged price for feed
* Have sound feedlot management practices
* Organise forward contracts/prices

“Optimising production is another important element. Ideally producers need a scale of operation that spreads overhead costs, so effectively lowers the cost of production, and increases efficiency and profit margins,” Mr Duddy said.

He said ration or grain costs were a major component of production and the amount of feed consumed depended on:

1. Starting weight
2. Ration quality
3. Growth rate, genetic type
4. Lambs ability to convert feed (feed conversion efficiency)
5. Target market weight

“Most lambs will need to be on feed for six to eight weeks so quality and availability of feed is critical. But weight gain is closely linked to genotype,” Mr Duddy said.

“Trials have shown huge ranges in feed conversion efficiencies within single lamb drafts, with the most efficient lambs putting on 1kg of liveweight for every 2.5kg of feed; while the worst performers ate 14kg of feed for 1kg of liveweight.

“That is a significant difference in terms of production so I would advise any producer feeding lambs intensively to make sure they have a set of scales and monitor lamb weight gains regularly.”

He also warned producers that feed conversion efficiency was not a constant and varied according to an animal’s sex and genotype, ration quality, external factors (such as the weather, heat), animal age and maturity, and possibly feeding time.

“Sound feedlot management is critical to this form of enterprise being successful and a lot hinges around things like feed trough setup and access to fresh water,” Mr Duddy explained.

“But I think whatever way producers opt to go the single most important message is “do the sums first”.”

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