



# FLOCK TALK



## Leading Sheep

### What ewe need to know

The Leading Sheep program recently held a series of successful remote monitoring days across Queensland. Around 150 producers attended the events in St George, Morven, Isisford and Longreach.

In other news, two extension officers recently joined Leading Sheep. Kiri Broad is based in Longreach, while Jed Sommerfield is based in Charleville. Kiri and Jed will be managing events and activities to engage and support sheep and wool producers. Welcome Kiri and Jed!

This edition of *Flock Talk* is all about promoting wool and encouraging producers to get more involved in the sheep industry. In this edition, a central west wool producer explains how they run their enterprise and shares their experience building a successful business. Also in this edition, if you're considering getting into wool sheep or have been out of the industry for a while, be sure to check out the top tips from an experienced agent on how to make the most out of sheep and wool.

You can connect with Leading Sheep on Facebook and join our mailing list at [www.leadingsheep.com.au](http://www.leadingsheep.com.au).

*Nicole Sallur, editor, Leading Sheep project manager and senior extension officer, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries*

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# Time is right for wool industry

### Top tips from Blackall wool producer

- Buy the best rams you can afford
- Use genetic data and visual appraisal to aid selection
- Use contractors, but be prepared to learn skills and do a lot of the work yourself
- Join groups, like Leading Sheep, to build your knowledge.

After 23 years as a wool producer, Alison Krieg believes there's no better time for newcomers to join the industry, and offers some sage advice for those contemplating a move into Merino sheep.

"Buy the best rams you can afford, learn as much as you can about producing wool, and don't follow fads or you'll go backwards," Ms Krieg said.

With the Eastern Market Indicator setting new records of more than 1500c/kg, she said optimism in the wool industry was at an all-time high, and only the lack of feed on the ground in much of western Queensland was delaying a move back into sheep.

"The timing is exquisite. Wool and carcase prices are excellent and the potential with wild dog exclusion fences is huge," Ms Krieg said.

"I grew up on a sheep property at Blackall and I believe you can always make money out of sheep.

"There's never been a time when it cost more to run them than I've earned."

Ms Krieg admits that her 7300 hectare property Benalla, 85km west of Blackall, is better suited to sheep than cattle, with its mix of country.

In a normal season she runs about 4200 sheep comprising 1800 ewes and their progeny and about 1200 wethers, which cut on average 7.6kg of sub-19 micron wool.



Blackall sheep and wool producer Alison Krieg with her kelpie offshoots.

According to Ms Krieg, wool growing is not rocket science, but relies mainly on good nutrition and genetics. The better you feed your sheep, the more wool, lambs and meat they will produce.

"Genetics are a no brainer – you buy the best you can afford," she said.

She pays an average of \$1800 for her rams and said it was important to look at measurements and match the information with visual appraisal to buy the best you can.

"The best cattle producers don't breed their own bulls and the best wool growers don't buy C-grade rams," she said.

"Rams are sold with figures available for fibre diameter, body weight, fleece weights etc. and your agent should be able to assist in ram selection."

Ms Krieg is a passionate advocate of learning, whether from her peers, at Leading Sheep forums or through reading Australian Wool Innovation's *Beyond the Bale*.

"Groups such as Leading Sheep are constantly holding information days and forums, so you can choose what you go to, and most wool growers are only too happy to impart knowledge," she said.

Ms Krieg saw her first wild dog on Benalla in 2005 and new lambs started to gradually disappear. She started building a dog proof

fence in 2009 and in the following years her two neighbours joined in.

The exclusion fence was finished this year and encloses the three properties in a cluster covering about 52,000 hectares. Lambs are dropping now and she's confident she'll mark about 80 per cent, which is a massive turnaround.


"The difference is palpable," she said.

"I can go out now confident that I won't see sheep which have been attacked by wild dogs.

"It's still a work in progress. We have a dog trapper inside the fence who caught three in the past week and we are continually shooting and baiting to hopefully get the remaining seven or so, but these exclusion fences will save the wool industry."

Despite predicting this purple patch in the wool industry would eventuate quite a few years earlier, she said she'd confidently recommend entering the industry now.

"We bought Benalla in 1994 when the memory of the collapse of the wool market was still pretty fresh and I remember saying to my then husband that I thought the wool industry was just on the verge of a major rebound," she recalled.

"I was wrong then but I think I might be on the money this time when I make the same prediction." 

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## FLOCK TALK



# Wool: Get the basics right and reap the rewards

### Top tips for newcomers to wool

- Choose the right sheep type to suit your country and assess potential returns
- Communicate effectively with your staff, especially the shearing team
- Work out how to share infrastructure, like shearing sheds and yards, rather than build new ones
- Continue to learn through programs like Leading Sheep.

Having worked in the wool industry for 30 years as a shearer, wool classer and broker, Bruce Lines has two pieces of advice for those who want to make the most of today's exceptional sheep and wool prices – get the basics right and plan for the next 50 years.

That applies to the long-term producers, who have ridden out the lulls in the wool market, as well as newcomers looking to make a profit in Merinos.

As the Queensland wool manager for Rodwells, Mr Lines is confident there is plenty of upside for both types of operators in a market that's breaking records.

According to Mr Lines the basics include: finding the right type of sheep to suit your country and cover your costs, communicating with your staff – especially those in the shearing shed, and working out ways to share infrastructure rather than building new yards and sheds.

"It is evident in the tough times some wool producers changed enterprises to cattle and more farming, and this upswing in prices will give them the security to bring sheep back," he said.

"Others who've been in sheep for the long haul have been prepared to pay for exclusion fences, and trapping and baiting to control wild dogs, as well as feeding sheep through the drought, and now they're making some great returns.

"People just need to be sure they're getting into a business that's financially sound for the long term."

The key to starting out is to find the right animal to suit your conditions, said Mr Lines, and that comes through education, logistics and assessing what's worked in the past.

"How many kilos of wool do you need, how many kilos of meat, how much feed are the sheep taking in to get that? Assess the risks and have a viable option that presents profitable returns before you start," he advised.

"A lot of people got into shedding breeds to get away from shearing and employing staff, but moving from a Merino enterprise to a solely meat sheep enterprise presents different management issues that many had not planned for.

"These include the feed intake, growth rate and carrying capacity of shedding breeds, and many of them still need shearing, so in some cases if they aren't getting better returns they may as well have stayed with Merinos."



Top tip from Bruce Lines is to find the right sort of sheep for your country.



Bruce Lines believes producers need to keep a close check on fleece quality.

He believes wethers are a strategic way to get back into sheep, producing both meat and wool.

"Producers in the west and north of the state could also turn off forward store animals for the feedlots and southern wool growers.

"If the purchaser is paying \$60-\$70 and feeds the sheep for a viable length of time and gets \$100, everyone's happy."

One factor that can make a big difference to the quality of the wool and meat produced is the relationship between the grower and the workforce, especially in the shearing shed.

Mr Lines is concerned that there's not enough communication between producers and their workers, whether they're shearing contractors, wool harvesting staff or station employees, such as jackaroos.

"It is vital people are clear on what their role involves, especially in the shearing shed, because if their job isn't done properly it can affect the whole wool clip and the return," he said.

"A lot more emphasis is needed on duty roles, especially the classer and wool handlers, and the grower and contractor.

"Talk to the contractor and get them on-property before shearing. Don't expect them to turn up and know how you want things done. Take them to the yards, explain the job required, what sheep will be shorn first – lambs, ewes, rams – and find out their expectations of the job."

The same advice applies when deciding whether to build yards or a shearing shed. Mr Lines recommends talking to your neighbours.

"It's a fairly big cost outlay to build new infrastructure and properties are much smaller

now, so it might be just a case of asking your neighbor if you can use their shed or yards," he said.

"There are contract shearing boards and portable yards that can be utilised too."


Mr Lines is passionate about the fact that Merinos helped build communities and towns across the state and would like to see improved awareness of the employment and financial benefits that can be generated by the industry.

According to him, one of the keys is bringing growers together to form networks and continue learning through programs such as Leading Sheep.

"The best advice comes from peer group conversations about issues of interest or common to all producers. How much wool are their sheep cutting? How many lambs are on the ground? What are you feeding your sheep? How are you controlling predators?"

"It's a little bit scary that people don't think they have the time, because when it comes to Leading Sheep forums and field days the industry is paying, so growers should be involved to get something in return.

"And in this sense, growers always have the chance to ask what they want, too. They can fill out a survey or ask organisers saying 'We want to talk about how much wool is on a sheep' or 'What's a viable option for us - to run wethers or breed lambs?' for example."

Mr Lines is confident that Queensland's Merino numbers can build from 1.8 million sheep to three or four million, which will help regenerate business in the small towns that have traditionally relied on the sector. 





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