

Increasing lambing success at Blackall

- Management changes to improve lambing success began with the purchase of scanning equipment to determine where losses were occurring.
- Splitting ewes into mobs of singles and twins, culling unproductive ewes, supplementary feeding and electronic identification to analyse flock reproductive data, have all since been implemented.
- Lambing percentages at joining have increased from as low as 60-65 per cent to an average of 75-85 per cent but wild dog problems have been severely limiting improvements in 2014.

Background

The Banks family are passionate sheep people and have made significant management changes in the past six years to increase lambing success and to lift the overall profitability of the enterprise.

They run 11,500 ewes, along with cattle on approximately 40,000 hectares at Blackall in Central Western Queensland.

Their management changes started with the purchase of scanning equipment and have been built upon from there.

The process has been highly motivating for everyone involved in the property, with family members feeling they are working towards a common goal and sharing ownership of the improvement program.



“Researching and implementing these changes has highlighted the potential that exists to increase lambing success in Central Western Queensland. It’s possible to increase the productivity of flocks through better lamb survival,” Jack Banks said.

“Increased lambing percentage in the area will ensure the industry remains viable into the future and will assist in replenishing Australia’s declining ewe base. It’s unfortunate that in 2014 wild dogs have been the over-riding factor in all management decisions and are severely limiting our results.

“This is not an instant or a cheap process, but it will increase the number of lambs weaned

every year and we have the satisfaction of knowing we are doing our best to optimise the health and well-being of pregnant ewes and the survival rates of lambs.”



Scanning

A scanner was purchased in 2009 to determine where losses were occurring, and gauge the reproductive potential of the flock. Since then, it has also supported a contract scanning side business.

- Scanning for twins – initially the Banks only scanned for wet or dry, but since 2011 they have been scanning for twins and using the data to better allocate available feed.
- Culling unproductive ewes – this strategy was adopted to improve the overall reproductive capacity of the flock. Maidens scanned not in lamb are given one more chance, whereas any ewes four years of age and older are culled.
- Smaller mob sizes for lambing – scanning data is used to split twin bearing ewes into smaller mobs, down from 500 to average of 350. Single bearing ewes' mobs have been reduced from 600-800 to 500.

Electronic tagging

An electronic tagging system was implemented in 2012 to better analyse reproduction data.

- Data recording aims to identify the most and least productive animals.
- Information recorded includes if the lamb was born a twin or single, whether the ewe was a maiden, if they have lost a lamb or had twins.
- It is still early days for using the scanning data. The first year of tagged ewe lambs are being pregnancy scanned in 2014 (those born in 2012).
- The data is stored in the program 'Kool Collect' from Sapien Technology.

Feeding for production

- All in lamb ewes are fed based on their scanning results (singles or twins) to meet nutritional needs.
- Molasses and grain have been the main feed sources.

Costs involved

There has been significant investment made in the business to implement the management changes.

- Fencing – 30km of new fencing installed to split paddocks at \$3000/km
- Water – six new troughs and tanks at \$1000/trough and \$3000/tank
- Electronic identification – 5000 tags at \$1.50/tag
- Feeding – additional labour for 1.5 days a week
- This is in addition to the ongoing costs of feed, labour, fuel for feeding, electronic tags for new lambs each year and the time taken to scan ewes and analyse the data.\

The electronic tagging system will require the purchase of a laptop for use in the yards.

“We are also looking into some improvements to the yards to make scanning and using the auto drafter easier and less time consuming,” Mr Banks said.

Was it good for business?

Overall the changes have been successful so far. However, the ongoing battle with wild dogs around Blackall has been very detrimental and is making it difficult to measure accurately the full impact of the strategies.

- Scanning has been successful in identifying and culling dry ewes. Over the years this has led to an increase in lambing percentages from as low as 60-65 per cent to an average of 75-85 per cent of ewes scanned in lamb.
- Lamb survival has been boosted through the combination of smaller mobs in smaller paddocks, keeping twin bearing ewes separate, and supplementary feeding.
- Splitting paddocks and moving watering points to the centre has led to more even grazing pressure.



“The changes made to increase lamb survival have led to a number of spin off benefits in wool production,” Mr Banks said.

“With the ewe in better condition throughout the reproductive cycle, fibre diameter is more consistent along the length of the staple, resulting in increased tensile strength.

“Wool cuts can also be expected to improve as adequate ewe nutrition during pregnancy has an impact on the wool quality of the lamb for the rest of its life.”

Research

The Banks are involved on a regular basis with programs run by Leading Sheep, Bestprac, Sheep CRC, Australian Wool Innovation and Meat & Livestock Australia, which all provide information on management changes.

“I would like to have put more research into the purchase of the scanning equipment, as I didn’t anticipate it turning into a sideline contracting business,” he said.

“Similarly, more research could have gone into the computer system to make scanning more simple.”

Conclusion

Many sheep producers are interested in the changes made by the Banks, and how it may work for them.

“We have learnt a huge amount as the new management systems have evolved. If I could start this process again I would split the mobs into twins and singles from the outset and decrease mob sizes.

“There has been much discussion with friends and neighbours about the changes we have made, and it would be fantastic to see other producers move towards changes such as scanning, feeding and lambing smaller mobs to increase lamb survival.

“We are commencing some fencing this year to control the dogs and once they are under control we will have a much clearer idea of how the management changes are impacting lambing success.

“With more Queensland producers involved, local benchmarks could be established and production potential better understood.”

Further information

For more information on drought planning, management and recovery for sheep producers please visit: <https://www.wool.com/on-farm-research-and-development/sheep-health-welfare-and-productivity/sheep-nutrition/awi-drought-resources/>

