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A number's game: identifying and keeping the most profitable sheep

- Measuring lambing traits and fleece weights through electronic identification tags has helped this St George wool grower fine tune flock management.
- Recording 'measurable' traits enables informed decisions to be made about retaining or culling breeding stock.
- It also means you have critical information available for agents and potential buyers when it does come time to sell.

Producer: Rod Avery, 'Burgorah', St George

Property size: 2800 hectares

Country type: Buffel grass and mulga

Stock numbers: 2400 grown sheep and 50 Charolais cross breeders



Measuring his Merino flock to select the most profitable sheep is the goal of St George grazier Rod Avery, and despite the drought of the past few years, he is well on his way to achieving it.

Rod leases 2800ha of improved buffel grass and mulga country on 'Burgorah' east of St George and usually runs 2400 grown sheep and 50 Charolais cross cows, but sheep numbers are down after a dry 2017.

Last September he opted to drought lot 940 ewes in lamb and feed them oaten hay and cotton seed. That decision paid off when 110mm of rain fell over three days in October and he ended up with 89 per cent lambing. The majority of the lambing percentage was from in the drought lot, not after the ewes were let out on green pick.

But it was the measurement of lambing traits and fleece weights through electronic identification (EID) ear tags that Rod says helped him fine-tune the management of the flock.

St George grazier Rod Avery checks weaners in the yards at 'Burgorah'. Mr Avery aims to identify his most profitable sheep by using EID tags to record fleece and carcass traits and the ability of the ewes to rear a lamb.



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He put the first Gallagher EID tags on the ewes at crutching 12 months ago, after seeing a presentation on measurement and recording by Cootamundra consultant Anthony Shepherd at a Leading Sheep technology field day in Dirranbandi in 2016.



“I’d also seen the genetic gains made by the pig and dairy industries through individual recording and I decided to start measuring the ewes with EID, but not necessarily classing at this point because we’re trying to build up numbers,” Mr Avery said.

“It’s going to take a couple of years to get the full picture by measuring traits like fleece weight, micron, yield, live weight, whether they have a twin

or single lamb or they are dry, or whether they actually rear a lamb, by recording their condition at lamb marking. All this information gets captured.”

Rod invested \$2000 in a Gallagher EID tag reader, \$3000 to update his scales to incorporate a Bluetooth reader, and \$1.80 per tag. With five other producers, he held an information day to learn how to side sample maiden ewes and send the wool away for yield and micron testing in a one-off measurement before they had a lamb.

Maiden ewes and the young ewes from the 2015 lambing were tagged first, and he says the results after shearing were surprising.

“The wool varied from 14 microns to 28 microns and averaged 19.5, and in the maiden ewes, fleece weights ranged from 2.8kg to 8kg. This mob of 500 hasn’t been classed, just bred up from what I had,” Mr Avery said.

“It will take a few years for the full picture to come out, because we’re not just selecting on micron and fleece weight, but on their ability to rear a lamb. We want to select the most profitable sheep.”

And there are other bonuses in having the data on hand.



Feeding ewes: Rod Avery invested \$25/head in hay and cottonseed to drought lot his lambing ewes on ‘Burgorah’, St George, and ended up with 89 per cent lambing.



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“When I’m weaning lambs at crutching and shearing I’m collecting information on what the mob is doing. I don’t tag the wether lambs but if I’ve got time I will weigh them all,” Rod said.

“It all takes time but when I sold some off, I had them all pre-weighed so the agent had all the information in front of him.”



Weighing fleece: A contractor weighs fleeces during shearing at ‘Burgorah’, St George, where Rod Avery is fine-tuning flock management through the use of EID ear tags.

Mr Avery joined a group of five woolgrowers who engaged Anthony Shepherd from SheepMatters (after meeting him at the Leading Sheep technology field day) to advise them on nutrition and management, and it was on this advice that he shortened joining last year from the normal eight weeks, to five.

Merino rams were joined with 1100 ewes, ending up with 930 in lamb and 380 of those bearing twins. As conditions got drier, Mr Avery sold off the cast-for-age and dry ewes and put the remainder on a harvested mung bean paddock.

When the rain didn’t come and there was not enough feed in the paddocks, he decided to split the ewes into three mobs. Twinners and older

singles were each put into two small 1-2ha holding paddocks next to the sheep yards, and the maiden singles moved into a larger 50ha paddock nearby with a stand of timber.

“I had trialled drought lotting with the Department of Primary Industries in the 1990s and read a Leading Sheep article about the Agar family doing it in 2013, so I learned from those,” Mr Avery explained.

“I fed oaten hay and ad lib cottonseed for six to eight weeks before we had 110mm of rain and I let the ewes and lambs out onto green pick 10 days later.

“I found I could roll out one round bale and 300 ewes could get around it without crushing each other, but they needed shelter from the wind and rain and that was when the paddock with the timber was good.

“Good water is essential too, and you don’t want to be wasting it. I built troughs of 15cm PVC pipe with slots cut in the top that the sheep could just get their mouths in to drink, rather than kicking dirt and dust into it.”



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Mr Avery said he was now considering doing something similar for twinning ewes this year and feeding better quality lucerne hay and maybe faba beans instead of cottonseed.

He spent \$25/head in the drought lot and only lost 3 per cent of ewes, and there was no break in the wool at crutching this year.

“Less walking around meant the ewes held their condition. I fed them in the late morning and early afternoon to avoid mis-mothering, and it didn’t take long for them to quieten down with the tractor poking through them, even when they were lambing,” Mr Avery said.

“We were lucky we had the early rain but I would’ve preferred to keep the ewes in the yards for at least 14 days to let the grass get away. We’ll learn more about it this year.

“There are a lot of variables to juggle – at the end of the day you want lambs on the ground and to keep the most profitable animals. If I can get rid of 20 per cent of ewes and make as much money, that’s what I’m looking at.”

Rod Avery

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