

Leading Sheep

Christmas check-in

With the year nearly done and (well and truly) dusted, it's a good time to check-in with a few key parts of your business. This edition of *FlockTalk* is all about knowing where you're at and using what you've got to its full potential.

The second article describes experiences with electronic identification and how it might prove useful in Queensland grazing business. Then we look at using your wool declaration to leverage on the current wool prices. If you're building up to joining in the new year, have a read of some top tips for checking up on your rams.

Speaking of the new year, it's 'new year, new me' for Leading Sheep as we commenced our new project with a few new faces in our team. A huge thank you to our departing contributors and your input to date. Our new priorities centre on pest management, drought planning, business performance, beneficial technologies, and ewe and lamb survival.

So keep a close eye out for some great events next year. Join our mailing list at leadingsheep.com.au or follow Leading Sheep on Facebook to make sure you don't miss a thing.

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Time for a check up on your rams

Dirranbandi Merino stud owner Max Wilson describes the similarities between a ram's testicle and a beer can, with simple tips to keep your rams firing on all cylinders.

As a stud owner, it's obviously vital for Max Wilson to run a thorough eye over the rams at his property, Wilgunya, but he says it's also critical for commercial sheep producers to do the same.

"Checking your rams is not a difficult thing to do and it should be part of basic management," Max said.

"The main part of a ram check is palpating the testicles. They should be about the size of a beer can. Make sure they're an even texture and firm (but not hard), without any lumps.

"It's particularly important to check the bump at the bottom of the testicle (the tail of the epididymis) as this is a common place to find lumps if you've got a brucellosis problem."

In Max's experience, testicular palpation is not a hard skill to learn. "It's simply looking for what's normal and the abnormal ones start to stand out," Max said.

"It is usually a matter of right or wrong and there's no in-between. If you're not sure, get your local veterinarian or Department of Agriculture and Fisheries extension officer to help you. Your local stud is another option for advice but they might be a little too invested in helping you to purchase new rams!" Max said.



Checking rams at Wilgunya.

A routine check at Wilgunya doesn't just mean palpating the testicles, it also includes checking feet, condition score and teeth. They find though that teeth are rarely a problem if you're keeping a young ram flock. "Keep your rams as young as they can be," Max said. "By the time they are getting past five years of age, they are going off the boil and they're probably leaning on the bar telling you how good they used to be."

Young rams are also less likely to have been exposed to brucellosis. It is a mandatory requirement for all Queensland Merino studs to maintain a brucellosis accreditation but

Max thinks testing of commercial flocks is worthwhile too. Brucellosis testing isn't mandatory for studs of other breeds or commercial flocks and if you have problems with straying sheep it can easily find its way into your flock.

So when's the best time to check your rams? You can check your rams at any time of the year but according to Max, the best time is a couple of months before joining so that you still have time to act if you need to and you know that the ones that are going out are ready.



Top tips

- Make ram checks part of your yearly management.
- When palpating testicles, start by looking for what's normal and the abnormal will stand out.
- It might be a good idea to get a second opinion for your first try.
- Aim to check your rams a couple of months before joining.

One great YouTube video tutorial about how to palpate ram's testicles is 'How to check ram's testicles (The Bundy edition)'. You can find information on conducting a full pre-joining ram check by searching for 'ram check list' at makingmorefromsheep.com.au.

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Electronic identification ideas

—how EIDs might be beneficial in your flock

Electronic identification (EID) in the sheep world is still in its early stages, but with Victoria trialling mandatory implementation, it might be part and parcel of the future landscape sooner than we think. One feature of EID is traceability, but it also provides an opportunity to gather useful data on your production. However, it is important that the data is easy to collect, cheap to process and applicable to decisions on your property, in order to be relevant to your business.

In June this year, Leading Sheep hosted a series of EID workshops throughout Queensland. Attendees at these events saw practical demonstrations on how to use EID tags with scanning and weighing equipment to collect data. This data, such as fleece weight, fleece micron, pregnancy status, lactation status and body weight, allows many commercial producers to make more informed decisions.

Here are some practical examples of how producers are already using EIDs in Queensland:

- When the ewes are scanned, the pregnancy status of the female is recorded and saved next to her EID number. This makes two of many management decisions easier—what ewes should be sold, and what and when you should feed each mob of ewes. Being able to identify the ewes that need a higher level of nutrition, especially ewes raising twins, simplifies mob segregation and tailored feeding, potentially saving money on feeding costs and improving lamb survival.
- If dry conditions continue and stock need to be sold, the ability to identify and draft specific lines out of the mob, at any time, allows for a variety of management decisions to be made. For example, if it's dry and getting drier, draft off ewes that are carrying twins and sell them. Or if it's dry but there is a high potential for rain, keep the ewes with twins and sell the non-pregnant ones.
- Budgeting income and marketing the clip can be done before the sheep are shorn by knowing the micron and historic fleece weight of the individual animal. A sample of fleece is taken, sent away for testing and the result is recorded against the individual EID number of the sheep. At a later date, the sheep is shorn and thanks to EIDs the micron of that fleece is known and is able to be classed into specific lines. This allows for more accurate and higher-quality lines of wool to be marketed and sold.
- In addition to micron testing, fleece weighing and recording can be carried out at shearing. Having a history of fleece weight for an individual can be useful when selecting for breeding traits.
- Body weights can also be tracked over time by collecting them at different stages of growth. Some examples of this are birth weight, weaning weight, weight gain over time (g/day), joining weight, pre-lambing weight and/or post-lambing weight. The data collected and saved over time allows for a wide variety of decisions to be made such as:
 - » Do I need to feed more?
 - » Have I fed too much?
 - » Which ones do I breed from?
 - » Which ones do I cull and what was a result of me doing this?



Thanks to EIDs the micron of fleece is known and is able to be classed into specific lines.

To view an in-depth case study on two enterprises using EIDs, visit the Leading Sheep website (leadingsheep.com.au) and look for 'Producer case studies' under the 'Resources' tab.



We do declare, it's a good time to have sheep

We've seen good numbers for wool in recent times but you could be missing out on a little bit extra by not using a wool declaration.

Sheep and wool production in Queensland is increasing—if only a little. The factors that have influenced this change are varied, such as increased predator control, fencing and record prices for both wool and live animals.

This has not been without challenge though, as the current and extensive drought has had a severe impact on the number of sheep and the amount of wool that is being produced in Queensland. Despite these dry conditions, the sheep numbers have increased slightly compared to last year. The recent release by Australian Wool Innovation and Australian Wool Production Forecasting Committee shows that two million sheep were shorn in Queensland in 2015–16 and 2.2 million are expected to be shorn in 2017–18.

While the total number of sheep shorn have increased, the expected wool clip for the current period is expected to be slightly reduced, with contributing factors including a decrease in kilograms of wool produced per sheep as well as increased demand for animals for consumption.

Producers who have sold wool in the last 12 months have received record-high prices. The Eastern Market Indicator has nearly doubled in the last four years and from September 2017 to September 2018 it has increased from 1522 c/kg to 2013 c/kg—a 75 per cent increase in 12 months.

| Date | \$/bale (180 kg) |
|----------------|------------------|
| September 2014 | \$2026 |
| September 2015 | \$2300 |
| September 2016 | \$2529 |
| September 2017 | \$2874 |
| September 2018 | \$3996 |

An example of this price rise on a per bale (180 kg) basis for 20 micron wool.

The question is, what will the price of wool be in 12 months?

By the numbers, it has been a good year to have sheep. Record high wool and lamb prices, as well as stable mutton prices, means there is significant interest and enthusiasm in the sheep and wool industries. Strong demand for high-quality, trusted Australian products continues to be influential on the price you receive for your product. Maintaining this trust is vital for the maintenance and growth of these markets, both domestically and internationally.

Two methods that are used to help maintain the trust and quality of these products are the National Vendor Declaration (NVD) and the National Wool Declaration (NWD). While the NVD is non-negotiable, the NWD is a voluntary declaration you make when you sell your wool.

From information published by the Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX), the percentage of Queensland wool that was sold with a NWD was 64 per cent, which is just below the Australian average of 66 per cent. Analysis of auction data by AWEX indicates premiums for non-mulesed wool, which has a declaration, are rising and are becoming substantial across a range of microns.

So if you're part of the 36 per cent not using a NWD, talk to your wool broker or for more information visit awex.com.au/publication/national-wool-declaration-nwd/.

