

Leading Sheep

Plan to scan and scan to plan

Scanning: key to increase in flock fertility

A Blackall wool producer believes introducing a pregnancy-scanning program is an investment that can lift flock fertility by 10 to 15 per cent annually and help fine-tune ewe management.



Ben Banks

"For example, when we first started scanning at Rivington, in the initial year we found we had about 75 per cent of ewes in lamb, so we were able to identify and cull infertile females.

"The following year we did the same thing, and by keeping the productive ewes and culling the non-performers we were able to lift our average to around 85 to 90 per cent scanned-in-lamb."

He said in real terms introducing a regular pregnancy-scanning program allowed him to lift flock fertility by 10 to 15 per cent within one year.

"This is something that other producers could also do, because essentially it is about having more information to make better-informed management decisions," Mr Banks said.

"Regardless of mob size, that sort of improvement, in terms of knowing what ewes are fertile and what they are producing for you, can make a significant difference to your bank balance at the end of the day.

"To me it makes sense to know what your ewes are doing and while it might cost 60 cents per head, the benefit is you increase the number of lambs on the ground each season and you are better able to prepare for the lambing season.

"I think everyone should get into it and make more out of your sheep. You've got to make every single animal count and they're worth so much money now that spending a few extra cents on scanning them is worth it."



Ben Banks and his wife Oona manage a 46 500 hectare family property, Rivington, west of Blackall, where they run 25 000 Merinos when the season permits.

For close to a decade the couple have also operated a contract pregnancy-scanning business, processing around 100 000 head of sheep annually.

With buoyant wool prices and growing industry optimism thanks to wild dog fencing, Mr Banks said breeding flocks were becoming increasingly valuable.

"Improving the fertility and productivity of your own flock is the most cost-effective way to boost your sheep numbers," said Mr Banks.

The western Queensland producer said he had used pregnancy scanning as an integral part of his own operation in recent years to lift production and in turn bolster profitability.

"I think scanning is one of the most under-utilised resources especially in central-western Queensland, where there is so much potential for improving management of pregnant ewes," he said.

"The information from scanning can assist you to make more informed decisions when it comes to management. Central-western

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PRODUCER SNAPSHOT

Producer: Ben and Oona Banks

Property: Rivington, Blackall

Property size: 46 500 ha

Livestock: 25 000 Merino ewes

Queensland is a harsh pastoral environment, but by identifying pregnancy status, we can tailor nutrition and husbandry management programs so we end up marking more lambs."

He said pregnancy scanning also allowed producers to draft ewes into mobs of multiple or single bearing ewes, as well as culling infertile animals, which improved flock efficiency and ensured feed was being utilised by the most productive animals.

"Twinning ewes can be run in smaller mobs and fed to meet their extra nutritional requirements. Alternatively, if you opt to sell a scanned-in-lamb ewe they generally make around \$20 a head more than a station-mated female," Mr Banks said.

"Meanwhile single ewes can be run in larger mobs and dry ewes can be run like wethers or sold."

Within his own operation, Mr Banks said he had become increasingly focused on scanning for multiple pregnancies, so more productive ewes were managed effectively to ensure they delivered lambs on the ground.

"Since we started scanning every year, we have been able to improve our flock's fertility, because we know what our ewes are really producing," he said.

Dry or wet years, it's always a good time to think about scanning. This edition of *FlockTalk* has scanning on the brain, looking at the merits of scanning and how to use the information in the best possible way.

Firstly, hear from Blackall wool grower, Ben Banks, who says that pregnancy scanning can lift flock fertility by 10 to 15 per cent. Western Rivers Veterinary Group also discuss scanning with an emphasis on how to know what a "normal" lamb marking result is for your flock, how to use this information and what sort of fertility problems it can highlight.

Keep an eye out for upcoming events around the traps, we've got technology and fencing, and nuts and bolts reproduction days on the cards, for both our existing sheep producers and those needing the tools to enter the sheep industry.

We've also added some great resources to our website recently with a booklet on Electronic Identification (EID) detailing producer and expert tips on the practical ins and outs of implementing EIDs in your flock and videos on the crucial considerations for weaning in dry times—have a look now to get ahead of the game. Head to leadingsheep.com.au for these resources and more.

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Data underpins flock scorecard

Having the ability to assess the pregnancy status of ewes is a key tool for sheep and wool producers to not only help inform management decisions, but also create their own flock scorecard and identify any problems early.

That's according to Western Rivers Veterinary Group partner, Dr Tim Gole, who undertakes flock pregnancy scanning for clients in Queensland and New South Wales (NSW).

"An important question from producers is 'what is a 'normal' lamb marking result and how do you know if there is a fertility or other health issue impacting your flock's productivity?'," Dr Gole said.

"Pregnancy scanning is essential to answering this question and I think of it as a measurement, management and forecasting tool.

"Scanning data is important because if you've got great conception rates but a poor lamb marking result, you can quickly work out where the losses are occurring. This gives you a very different insight to just putting the rams in with the ewes and waiting until lamb marking to see the result.

"The main benefit of scanning is the ability to identify the pregnancy status of ewes and allocating nutritional resources efficiently according to need.

"Identifying the pregnancy status of ewes is a powerful management tool as it allows you to put in place measures to influence lamb survivability, which is directly related to birthweight and in turn, ewe nutrition. This is particularly important for twin-bearing ewes.

"Every producer should be undertaking ewe body condition scoring at scanning time. It's easily learnt and producers can undertake this themselves giving very cost-effective data collection.

"If a twin-bearing ewe's body condition score is 2, her lamb survivability is likely to be quite low at under 50 per cent. However, if you take her up to a body score 3, you can increase lamb survivability rates to well over 60 per cent.

"In contrast, for a single-bearing ewe, if you take her body condition score from 2 to 3, the change

in expected lamb survivability is only likely to be a couple of per cent.

"Identifying your twin-bearing ewes and treating them differently is the best return on investment for feeding or pasture management."

Control the controllable

Dr Gole said the best time to undertake pregnancy scanning is usually 80 to 90 days after joining.

"Knowing the pregnancy status of a flock is an effective risk management tool because if you've had a really poor joining, it's better to know 90 days after the rams went in than 150 or 170 days after," Dr Gole said.

"If you get a poor scanning result, you can work your way back from scanning to assess the likely impacting factors.

"There are a number of factors to consider, and the first should be body condition scores. Comparing the scores of each ewe at scanning to their scores at joining can yield valuable insights.

"Producers should also look at nutrition because there's a direct correlation between nutrition and conception rates.

"External factors can also play a role, so review the calendar and examine climatic conditions at joining, particularly heat."

Dr Gole said producers should also look at their ram team and investigate any possible diseases that can impact fertility, such as ovine brucellosis.

Pre-joining ram examinations are typically undertaken at least six weeks prior. If producers are achieving good scanning results but a low lamb marking result, disease testing can be undertaken.



Dr Tim Gole, Western Rivers Veterinary Group, teaching vet student Andrew Pegg about scanning

Top 5 benefits of pregnancy scanning

- Powerful measurement, management and forecasting tool
- Early identification of fertility or other health issues impacting your flock's productivity
- Allows you to manage the nutrition requirements of single and twin-bearing ewes to maximise lamb survivability
- Can help identify possible diseases in your ram team that may be affecting fertility
- Producers should examine flock nutrition, possible diseases and their ram team management to help identify any fertility issues highlighted by pregnancy scanning

Key diseases behind lamb losses and late abortions can include ovine vibriosis, a campylobacter infection; toxoplasmosis, which is associated with feral cats; and pestivirus.

Setting benchmarks

Dr Gole said scanning data helps producers set their own benchmarks.

"When you start generating data from your own flock, it's always a challenge, particularly for wool producers, to identify what's normal for your flock," Dr Gole said.

"You've got the classic rubber band—there's reproductive performance on one side and wool production on the other. If you select constantly for heavy wool cutting sheep, it comes at the expense of reproductive performance.

"That's why I think generating your own results is beneficial because it allows you to compare like with like and set benchmarks.

"At scanning time, you can look to budget and do cost-benefit analysis and see where big gains can be made.

"There were some studies done at Trangie Agricultural Research Centre that found a massive difference between the top 25 per cent and bottom 25 per cent in terms of your flock, and the big difference came in the number of lambs reared. The research found a \$436 difference in lifetime value, with most of that figure based on net reproduction rates.

"For the data it gives you, it's rewarding. There has been some really big uptake of pregnancy-scanning programs in western NSW, because lamb production as sale of offspring makes up such a significant proportion of income now."



Keep an eye out for AWI and Leading Sheep's Picking Performer Ewes workshops, that cover many of the concepts in this article such as the dollar difference between top and bottom performers and the impact of ewe condition score on lamb survival. Or get in touch to request one in your area. For more information about pregnancy scanning, including a list of pregnancy scanners in Queensland, visit leadingsheep.com.au and search 'scanning' or 'pregnancy scanners'.