

## Boosting reproduction at the core of Electronic Identification

**Producers:** John and Debbie Cowley, 'Munda', Goondiwindi

**Enterprise type:** Dual-purpose Merinos, producing 19-micron wool and prime lambs; cropping including chickpeas, wheat, barley, oats for stock, grain and forage sorghum, and dryland lucerne

**Land area and type:** 2,000 hectares (ha); Brigalow-Belah soils

**Flock size:** 1,300 Merino ewes

Using Electronic Identification (EID) technology and an autodrafting system as key flock management tools has allowed Queensland sheep producers John and Debbie Cowley to significantly increase fertility and also reduce losses in their flock.



Three years since hosting a Leading Sheep EID on-farm workshop at their Goondiwindi property, 'Munda', the Cowleys have continued to move the dial on their flock productivity and profitability goals.

The husband and wife team run dual-purpose Merinos on their 2,000ha sheep and cropping property, producing 19-micron wool. They have a flock of 1,300 Merino ewes and join their cull ewes to a meat breed ram to target the highly valuable prime lamb market.

The flock is run as one mob, except for the lambing period, and is rotationally grazed over cultivation in fallow periods.

### Decision to use EIDs

After being out of the sheep industry for 20 years, John and Debbie reintroduced sheep to their enterprise in 2015. They started using EID tags later the same year to collect individual lifetime data on all of their ewes.

They also bought a three-way autodrafter, panel reader, and indicator to efficiently collect data from the tags.

"We took a long-term view to the technology and could see the economics of buying all the equipment we needed in one hit, rather than starting with a stick reader and then having to upgrade further down the track," John said. "The initial impetus to use EIDs was so we could have a lifetime record of pregnancies on individual ewes."

EID tags are applied to all the ewe lambs at lamb marking. Wethers are not tagged as they are shorn and sold for the prime lamb market within 12 months of age.

"In the first year we only scanned for pregnancy but every year after that we scanned for multiples," Debbie said. "Every ewe has a recording and it's either a two, one or zero for each year."

"For example, when a five-year-old ewe comes through, you can bring up her data and see her last four pregnancies and see if she's a 200 percenter, (meaning she's had twins every year), a 150 percenter, (meaning she's had twins every second year), or a 100 percenter, who has singles."

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“We also collect data when we wet and dry our ewes at lamb marking.”

### Boosting fertility

The Cowleys use the linked reproductive information on EIDs to draft and make management decisions to boost fertility.

“We run our ewes as one mob, but they’re drafted off depending on if they’re pregnant with twins or singles,” John said.

“The ewes pregnant with twins are taken out prior to lambing and given better feed such as oats if it’s dry.

“At the end of the day, it helps you see which sheep are making you money and which ones aren’t.

“When it’s dry, if you need to reduce your sheep numbers, you can look at each ewe’s pregnancy history and sell the less productive ewes, depending on your criteria.

“Fertility is our main criteria, so any ewe that is giving us two lambs every year or every second year, we would rather keep those than the 100 percenters.”

The impact of using data from the EIDs to make management decisions has been significant for John and Debbie.

“Our fertility rate the first year at pregnancy scanning was 130 per cent in our Merino ewes. By using the data to select for fertility and eliminate empty ewes, we’re now up to 163 per cent, which we think is decent,” Debbie said.

### Addressing lamb losses

After they started to see improvements in fertility, John and Debbie turned their attention to analysing at what point lamb losses were occurring and how they could reduce those losses.

“For us, the EID is a really effective and efficient way of working on losses. Every time we’re in the yards doing something, we turn the counter on the panel reader on and put the sheep through and it will keep reading the EIDs so we’re able to see at what point we’ve lost any,” Debbie said.

Once they have collected pregnancy scanning data and know how many lambs are expected, a count is conducted at lamb marking when EID tags are applied to ewe lambs, and then another count is conducted at weaning, and so on.

To address lamb losses, John and Debbie target predators and conduct an annual baiting program to eliminate foxes and feral pigs.

They have also started vaccinating ewes a couple of weeks before lambing. Lambs get their first vaccination at lamb marking and then a booster at weaning.

“We could see our big losses were between scanning and lamb marking. We have reduced our losses by about 10 per cent,” John said.





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“One thing we can work on now is mismothering.”

The Cowleys use just one tag on each ewe, which incorporates EID, Visual Identification (VID), and also fulfills the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) requirements.

“The tag bucket file is obtained from the tag manufacturer which gives the EID and VID linkages via a data file, and this is uploaded into our system,” Debbie said.

“At any point, we can look at the sheep and know which year they were born, and their individual identification number.

“If we have losses in the paddock, we can easily identify them.”

### Quick analysis

All the data John and Debbie collect on their flock is stored in the cloud (internet based storage) via wi-fi with the push of a button. This gives them the ability to generate reports to analyse performance without the need for spreadsheets. The data can be accessed from any device – mobile, tablet, laptop or desktop computer.

Among the many reports they generate is detailed information about wethers, including sale weights for processors, comparing weight gains of wethers and ewes, and analysing general patterns of weight gains.

Looking ahead, John and Debbie see there is potential to use EIDs to increase efficiencies in their wool production and at shearing.

“For us, EIDs work really well and we’re really glad we did it. It is such an easy way of collecting data,” Debbie said.

“Fertility and deaths were the big areas we could focus on easily. Our goal is to have production from every mouth we feed each year,” John said.

### Top tips

For any producers considering introducing EIDs and autodrafting technology into their business, John and Debbie have the following tips:

- Ensure there is training provided and ongoing customer support for both the hardware and software, regardless of what brand you buy.
- Spend a bit more upfront and buy automated drafting equipment with a panel reader and an indicator that is capable of drafting on multiple criteria. It is more efficient, simplifies the data collection and means less people are required in the yards.
- Identify what you want to improve and record data on the most important aspects that you need quantified to make informed decisions. For example, if fertility is important to you, then start recording lifetime pregnancy data on your ewes.
- Ensure the software provides useful reporting and is easy to work with.