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The benefits of Lifetime Ewe Management

Producers: Ross and Cheryl Brown, “Belmont Park”, Westmar

Enterprise type: Mixed farming enterprise. Predominantly Santa Gertrudis – Shorthorn cross cattle and self-replacing merino ewes for wool and sheepmeat

Land area and type: 2,800 hectares (ha); predominantly red loam soil

Flock size: 1,200 self-replacing merino ewes

Having traditionally focused on their Santa Gertrudis/Shorthorn cross cattle herd, rising cattle prices and a string of challenging seasons prompted third-generation Westmar producers Ross and Cheryl Brown to increase their self-replacing Merino ewe flock from roughly 200 ewes to 1200 today.

As part of their decision to increase sheep numbers, the Browns joined the St George/Westmar Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) Group in July 2020, as they looked to ensure their Merino enterprise was as profitable and productive as possible.



Westmar producer Ross Brown

A nationally accredited 12-month on-farm group learning program developed and funded by Rural Industries Skill Training and Australian Wool Innovation, LTEM is designed to help producers boost productivity by identifying and improving key management practices like body condition scoring, pasture assessment and forage budgeting, and nutritional management of ewes and lambs.

Meeting six times per year in groups of up to seven producers, nationally since 2005 LTEM participants have reported an average increase in stocking rate of 9.3%, increased marking and weaning rates by 7% and a 25% reduction in ewe mortality.

“In joining the St George/Westmar Lifetime Ewe Management group, we set out to develop a smarter approach to managing our product—which is our Merino ewe—and going forward make her as productive in our program as she can be,” Ross said.

Nutrition and weaning percentages

Sheep Solutions consultant and LTEM trainer Geoff Duddy says the main goal of the course is to improve lamb survival through a better understanding of a ewe’s requirements across her life cycle.



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“We step producers through a series of modules and key management practices, like condition scoring and pasture assessments,” Geoff said.

“This gives them the ability to assess the condition of the ewes, and then make an assessment based on the available feed quality and quantity as to whether the ewe is able to harvest enough energy to meet her needs during pregnancy and through to weaning.



“From there, informed decisions can be made around supplementary feeding at key times.”

Sheep Solutions consultant and LTEM facilitator, Geoff Duddy

Currently running 1200 ewes across 900 hectares at “Belmont Park”, the Browns believe developing an understanding of and implementing body condition scoring and subsequent nutrition management decisions across a ewe’s production cycle has been a major benefit of the LTEM course.

In addition to scanning, which the Browns have recently implemented through involvement with the LTEM group, Ross sees nutrition as a key to improved performance, with a 120% lambing percentage in 2020.

Today, the Browns feed ewes before they go out to lamb and monitor and supplementary feed after lambing as required.

“Prior to joining the St George/Westmar LTEM group, we had limited information on what a ewe actually needs throughout her production cycle and how, under Queensland pasture conditions, we could help better meet feed needs,” Ross said.

“Through LTEM and a focus on condition scoring the ewes, we are able to see where our sheep are in terms of condition and make decisions about their nutrition that get them in a position where they can be as profitable and productive as possible.

“Using body condition scoring (BCS) to monitor ewes and using a targeted feeding regime gave us more ewes in lamb, more lambs on the ground and more live lambs at weaning.

“By getting and maintaining our ewes at a BCS score 3 or more before lambing and reducing loss to predators with an exclusion fence, we’ve seen a massive improvement in weaning percentages.

“From about 800 ewes, we would barely have any weaner ewes to retain or wethers to sell. Now we frequently sell about 400 wethers, culling about 100 weaner ewes and retaining 300, and cull ewes on age and performance. We now have a strong self-replacing flock, increasing our ewe numbers, and can generate an income from our sheep enterprise.”

Looking over the fence

On top of the technical aspects of the LTEM course, the Browns see huge benefit in the opportunity that comes from getting together to share experiences and lessons with other producers in the area.

“Bouncing ideas off others in the group has been of huge benefit to us,” Ross said.



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“Sitting around and having a cup of coffee with the other group members, talking about what changes we’ve made since the last meeting is absolutely the best part of the group. You really learn a lot of things that aren’t in the text. An example of this is joining maidens that we used to run as one mob. We now join our maiden ewes separately and use a higher percentage of rams. Our best result is from about 200 maiden ewes there was three that did not scan in lamb. We also scan our ewes now and can identify which ones to keep, feed or sell.”

The value of learning from other producers is something Geoff Duddy also sees as integral to the success of LTEM.

“I think the main benefit of the LTEM groups is that producers talk,” Geoff said.

“We get a range of ages and skill bases, and giving them a chance to talk to each other and share their challenges and successes is invaluable.”

Lasting value

Beyond the 12-month LTEM course, the Browns and Geoff Duddy agree there is lasting value to be gained from the process.

“I think it’s important for people who are in a growth phase with their Merino ewe enterprises to look at some sort of training,” Ross said.

“The dollars it cost us to join LTEM look minuscule in the bigger picture because we’ve made changes that have made our whole enterprise more productive and get more from our sheep.

“For example, we now weigh our lambs, which we never used to do. We draft them, weigh them and then group and market them accordingly, which lets us get the best returns we can from each animal.”

Feedback Geoff Duddy has received from other producers’ echoes this.

“I’ve had producers tell me they were essentially able to recoup the cost of the LTEM course in one session, because the improvements they can make across the entire lifetime of the ewe are so valuable – from a reduction in ewe losses to increasing scanning and in-lamb rates and higher weaning percentages,” Geoff said.

“In addition, producers build relationships that far outlast the 12-month course and will often continue to meet up and talk about their operations and share experiences off their own bats.

“The group dynamics and opportunity to learn from each other really is one of the positives of the course.”

For more information or to join a Lifetime Ewe Management group, visit www.wool.com/LTEM

Leading Sheep is a partnership between the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and Australian Wool Innovation, and is supported by AgForce.

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