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Pain relief that hits the spot

Producers

Doug and Lauren Tindall, 'Janet Downs', Longreach

Enterprise type

Sheep and cattle enterprise

Land area and type

22,000 hectares (ha); Rolling Mitchell Grass Downs

Flock size

About 8000 merino sheep



Doug, Lauren and Guy Tindall, 'Janet Downs', Longreach

Using pain relief during lamb marking has quickly become an integral part of Doug and Lauren Tindall's on-farm operation, enabling lambs to find their mothers quickly post-procedure and improving subsequent weaning percentages.

With a target to mark 2500 to 3000 merino lambs per year, the Tindalls first introduced pain relief at marking in 2020. They've been using the NumNuts device and, as Doug explains, they have been delighted with the results to date.

"We have found lambs that have been administered with an anaesthetic during marking show very few signs of discomfort and are able to mother-up almost instantaneously," Doug said.

"This is particularly useful when moving livestock out of the yards very soon after marking as the lambs just follow along with their mothers.

"It's important to understand what your pain relief objectives are in advance and find the best solution for your business.

"We run a non-mulesed merino flock, so at marking we are focusing only on the tail and the purse.

"Having an easy-to-administer anaesthetic specifically suited to the procedures we are doing means we had very little trouble incorporating pain relief into our operation.

"Pain relief—as a livestock management technique—has therefore fitted seamlessly with everything else we do and has quickly become an important component of how we look after our lambs and boost our on-farm productivity."



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The benefits of pain relief

Lamb marking refers to husbandry procedures commonly carried out on Australian sheep meat and wool farms, often including earmarking, castration and tail-docking. Vaccinations are often completed at the same time.

The Tindalls carry out marking when their lambs are two to eight weeks old. Lauren says they have seen a significant difference in how the lambs behave with pain relief.

“When pain relief is administered during marking, our lambs are visibly happier—you can literally see the difference,” Lauren said.

“They quickly come out of the cradle and go straight back to their mothers and therefore can be released back into the paddock a lot sooner, where they start to feed, be with their mates and build their strength and weight—all of which has a positive outcome for weaning.

“For our farm, using pain relief is a no-brainer. We have seen how it positively impacts productivity, profitability—and most importantly—animal welfare outcomes.”

NumNuts

The Tindalls first started to consider how best to administer pain relief in 2015, but it wasn’t until NumNuts was available in Queensland in 2020 that their pain relief operation kicked into gear.

NumNuts provides targeted pain relief for tail docking and castration of sheep with a rubber ring. The device itself is an easy-to-use rubber ring applicator, combined with an injector that dispenses NumOcaine anaesthetic. Developed by Sensino, with contributions from CSIRO, Australian Wool Innovation and Meat & Livestock Australia, NumNuts allows welfare-focused sheep farmers a new approach to lamb marking.

“As we are early adopters, our first challenge was where to source the device and active ingredient, so we talked to vets, rural suppliers and even direct to the manufacturer,” Lauren said.

“Once we overcame that initial hurdle, we started by trialling the product on a small mob and haven’t looked back since. It fits perfectly with what we are already doing on-farm, so the level of disruption is minimal. It has helped us to calculate in advance how many lambs we are marking and can then order the right amount of active ingredient from our vet and reduce waste.

“Practically, we move the lambs in, complete marking and vaccinations, move them out again and start on the next mob. The quick turnaround is hugely important for a business of our size as it allows lambs to mother up and walk longer distances back to their paddocks.

“We are seeing pain relief costs of around 60 cents per lamb and around \$1.20 for ram lambs. However, we are saving on labour costs as it takes far less time to move more mobs through the system because they mother-up so quickly.”



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Provenance and pain relief

Using pain relief is a “no-brainer” for the Tindalls, and their advice to other sheep producers is “just do it!”. Benefits include reduced labour costs and increased productivity, which Doug says is underpinned by employing farming methods and techniques more closely aligned to consumer expectations.

“Beyond the farm gate, we are also aware of our responsibility to align our production systems with what the community are telling us as far as their expectations around the treatment of livestock in our care are concerned. We know the use of pain relief during husbandry practices such as tail docking and castration is more important than ever.

“Consumers want to know where their food comes from and how it’s raised, so as primary producers we have a responsibility to acknowledge that and provide evidence that our lambs are reared in a system that offers a consistently high level of animal care and wellbeing—and we’re incredibly proud of our track record in this regard.”

Top tips

Doug and Lauren have the following tips for producers considering introducing new forms of pain relief into their business:

- Go for it! Understand in advance what you want to achieve and find the best pain relief solution for your property.
- Do not underestimate the ability to move mobs through marking more quickly and efficiently. You may invest more upfront but increased weaning percentages and labour savings should ensure a more productive and profitable business.
- Never underestimate the changing expectations of consumers when it comes to demonstrating the use of responsible and professional animal husbandry techniques.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Talk to your vet, rural retailers, product manufacturers, local extension officers, friends and neighbours to seek advice on what has worked for them.

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