The Maidens Monitor (Apr-Jun 2025)

The Making Maidens Weight producer demonstration site (PDS) is exploring ways to improve lamb marking rates from maiden ewes in central west Queensland. Conception rates of maidens in the region are generally good, however, converting these foetuses to lambs remains a challenge. Demonstration properties are exploring condition scoring, weighing, supplementation, scanning and udder assessment of ewes to improve their marking percentage. As part of this initiative, individual animal data are collected using electronic identification (eID) in large-scale, commercial operations to highlight how this data can contribute to improved decision making.

How are we using WhatsApp?

The Making Maidens Weight WhatsApp chat continues to be a great way for producers to engage with the PDS. Topics of discussion this quarter included drones for mustering, popular eID tags being used by members of the chat, culling strategies, lice management, an animal health query, tech support, artificial intelligence and discussion about topics for the next PDS field day. The chat was used extensively for seeking local opinions and advice from fellow producers, demonstrating the value of this tool for peer-to-peer support.

Demonstration sites

During this period, demonstration flocks were preparing for lamb marking. Little new data was presented in the chat, aside from an update from Dunblane on maiden (blue tag) pregnancy rates (35% pregnant) and their average daily weight gain (181g/hd/day) from 5/3/25 to 23/5/25. The producer concluded that the dry summer and the suboptimal supplementary program produced this result. They reflected that the supplementary program requires a review and should commence earlier in the future to ensure ewes reach their target liveweight for joining. The group is looking forward to hearing the analysis of the 2023-24 joining from Dr Gordon Refshauge (NSW DPIRD).

One core producer of the project provided his lamb marking results alongside an enquiry as to whether anyone else had experienced lower lamb marking percentages this year. For their scanned-in-lamb (SIL) maidens (blue tags) their lamb marking percentage was 55%. For their mature age SIL ewes, the lamb marking percentage was 86%. There was considerable evidence of dog bites and tracks and lambs with wounds from eagles.

Albeit destructive in some parts of western Queensland, the demonstration sites and surrounding areas welcomed late season rainfall. Conditions were warm enough to produce a bulk of green feed (Image 1) which has set the demonstration sites up for the rest of the year and produced good pasture conditions for lambing.

If you'd like to read the most recent producer newsletter (April 2025) to learn more about what the demonstration flocks have been up to, please contact David Counsell on 0427 073 606 or davidjcounsell@bigpond.com.

Image 1: Dunblane pasture conditions in late-April following late season rainfall (Image: David Counsell).

Topics of discussion in the chat

The WhatsApp chat is being used as a peer-to-peer learning group, with questions that may otherwise go unanswered or require trawling through Google,

being answered by fellow producers and other industry representatives. This quarter, discussions didn't delve deep into a few topics, instead covered a wide range of topics that various people weighed in on. Discussion explored:

- Drones: conversation about brands and models of drones and advice about being mindful of frightening them into muddy areas following significant rainfall.

- Parasite management: the increasing prevalence of lice in the region, according to some contractors, was highlighted. Discussion revolved around treatment, cost/head and management challenges that may impact the efficacy of lice treatment. The importance of having trained and precise people to backline was highlighted by several producers as being crucial to correct application. Please visit LiceBoss for more information.

- Animal health: one local producer asked what she was seeing on one of her sheep. The consensus was cheesy gland and recommendations for treatment was provided by Gordon and other producers.

- Artificial intelligence (AI): the question was posed whether AI can be used to streamline all the individual animal data recorded in spreadsheets. Gordon indicated there is some work being done to explore the capabilities of AI in speeding up the process of linking files across multiple years. Another person suggested two Excel functions that could carry out the desired function.

- Advice sought for establishing a new dog fence with regards to grading.

- The influence of udder integrity on lamb marking percentages. CSIRO were thought to be doing work in this space

- Key topics that meat sheep producers are interested in included: the importance of buying rams from brucellosis free ram suppliers, the proven breed options for western QLD, getting lambs to weight in western QLD and supplementation strategies to get more maidens pregnant and to increase growth rates of weaners.

- Other topics of interest to the group, to have explored at a field day, included: supplementary feeding when pastures are still green, how to use supplements to make the most of the available feed, diet quality and how to quickly, accurately and regularly assess the quality of grass.

- Pests and weeds: high levels of wild dog activity, an expansion of sticky florestina (pasture weed) and locust activity were reported in the region.

- Discussion of what influences culling strategies and decision-making in the region.

Resources mentioned

- Sheep blowflies factsheet.

- Podcast with Dr Gordon Refshauge: fertility and fecundity in the Australian sheep flock between 2006 and 2019. Click here.

Upcoming events

- PDS Field Day: Thursday 14 August. Register here.