



How eID is shaping the future at Lansdowne

Producer: Chris Turnbull, 'Lansdowne', Tambo

Enterprise type: Sheep and cattle

Land area and type: 66,000 hectares; largely open grassland plains with access to the Ward River.

Flock size: 38,000

In November 2023, Chris Turnbull hosted a Leading Sheep workshop on his property, sharing how labour shortages drove him to invest in tools and technology to improve efficiency. One of the biggest steps forward has been the adoption of electronic identification (eID), helping build a tailored flock management plan for Lansdowne. Chris has since begun tagging his sheep using a cost-effective approach: premium tags for rams, mid-range for stud ewes, and the most economical tags for his commercial flock.

Alongside eID, Chris has also invested in a sheep handler to reduce labour and improve animal husbandry practices – many of which weren't practical before. eID has become a powerful decision-making tool for Chris, enabling him to fine-tune his flock based on individual reproductive history, wool performance, and weight gains.

Data that drives breeding and profitability

For Chris, data is only as valuable as what you do with it. On the stud side of the business, he collects as much information as possible, including fleece weights, body weights, reproductive traits, and structural scores, to inform precision breeding decisions, particularly when selecting rams.

"The more data you collect, the better-informed decisions you can make," Chris said. "But there's also that saying, 'garbage in, garbage out' – if you're not reviewing or using the data, then why collect it?"

In their commercial flock, Chris focuses on fleece and body weights, which are two of many key profit drivers for Merino sheep. Some producers, he explains, are going a step further by using mid-side sampling and fibre testing to calculate fleece value, then combining that with body weight to determine carcass value. From there, they can estimate an individual animal's total return (wool, meat, and reproductive potential) and make more strategic culling and breeding decisions.

"It's about identifying the top performers and the low performers, and lifting the overall average," he said. "You want more sheep at the top of the bell curve and fewer at the bottom."

With three years' experience using eID technology in the stud, Chris is now applying that same mindset commercially. He's confident that, when used properly, eID isn't just a tool for tracking – it's a tool for building a more productive and profitable flock.

Saving time, reducing labour, lifting profit

Chris has invested in an automatic sheep scales and drafter, allowing him to carry out much of the yard work without additional labour, and said it's a gamechanger for both productivity and efficiency. Data from each sheep is captured directly onto their tag and instantly uploaded; no clipboards, no data entry, and no wasted hours sorting through spreadsheets.

"We do a lot of sheep work now without the staff, because we can use that technology to our advantage," he said. "No writing it down, no rustling through paper. That saves time, and that's money at the end of the day."



While the upfront costs can be significant, with auto drafters priced anywhere from \$25,000 to \$60,000 depending on features, Chris says the return on investment is there if the system is used effectively. In particular, he points to labour savings, improved workplace safety, and the ability to make faster, data-driven decisions as key benefits.

The handling system has streamlined operations in both the stud and commercial flocks, and Chris believes the value of eID stretches beyond wool production, with applications for all flocks, particularly in tracking reproductive performance and lifting overall flock productivity. "There's low-hanging fruit ready to be grabbed," he said. "Once you've got the tags, you might as well have the technology to go with it and use it properly. That's when it starts paying for itself."

"The sheep industry has moved to having eID tags – that's just the way it's going. Everyone's got to do it to follow suit and sell sheep in Australia. So, if you're going to do it, you might as well use it to your fullest advantage and make it an asset instead of liability."

Lost tags, lost data

While the upfront cost of eID was a challenge, the issue of tag retention has posed an ongoing cost and practical frustration.

"Tag retention is our biggest issue," Chris said. "We're trialling a couple of different products, using one brand in our stud ewes and another in our flock ewes, to see which design holds up best in our conditions."

Even with careful application, a small percentage of tags are inevitably lost. In a commercial setting, replacing a tag is inconvenient but manageable. One hundred lost tags a year at \$2 each might be only \$200, but the real cost is in the lost valuable data. In a stud context, where years of performance data may be attached to that animal, a lost tag can mean a permanent loss of valuable information.

Top tip

- Based on his experience, Chris's top tip is that tag placement matters. Make sure to insert the tag in the middle of the ear (allow a little room for growth), closer to the head of the sheep. Tags placed too far out are more likely to get caught on fences, branches, and handling equipment, or at higher risk of being accidentally cut out by shearers.