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Producer Research Support

\$uperewe\$ group set to capitalise on demand for high performance prime lamb mothers
\$uperewe\$



The project

A major survey has revealed 84% of commercial prime lamb producers would either buy or consider buying performance-bred prime lamb mothers on contract.

This is seen as a marketing opportunity for members of the \$uperewe\$ group which plans to market high performance maternal sires by forming strategic alliances with ewe breeders.

The findings are contained in a survey conducted under a Producer Research Support project which shows a far more complex lamb industry in southern Australia than may have been previously thought.

Variation in climate, pasture growth and productivity, ewe breed types and finishing systems make it difficult to make blanket recommendations on management, breeding policy and marketing.

The survey reveals some interesting attitudes and levels of performance.

\$uperewe\$ chairman, Lynton Arney, Strathalbyn, South Australia, said the survey was conducted because of a perceived lack of understanding among prime lamb breeders of the benefits of using high performance maternal genetics.

There has been some (but not large scale) shift towards using higher fertility Booroola infused ewes, and the performance-bred Coopworth ewes or their cross with the Merino. There has also been some work done within some strains of Merino sheep to improve their suitability as prime lamb dams.

The group identified a need for information from prime lamb producers regarding the value of maternal traits to help formulate a suitable selection index.

The \$uperewe\$ group was formed by a number of maternal sire breeders from South Australia and Victoria seeking improvements in the genetics of the maternal component of the industry. The group's intention is to breed high performance maternal sires that will produce more productive, highly fertile daughters with worm resistance.

These higher performance maternal genetics, as identified by LAMBPLAN maternal indexes, would then be marketed under the \$uperewe\$ trade mark.

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Key points

- Guidance is needed for LAMBPLAN maternal selection indexes.
- Feed conversion efficiency/mature liveweight relationships may become an important issue in the pursuit of bigger ewes.
- The Superewe\$ group should consider contracting outside assistance to manage alliances with crossbred ewe breeders and market performance genetics.
- Further analysis of ewe breed/type/lamb finishing and marketing relationships should be undertaken.
- The low emphasis put on LAMBPLAN information when selecting maternal sires is of concern and needs to be addressed.
- The requirement for crossbred ewes to be mulesed should be a basic requirement for ewes sold under the Superewe\$ banner.
- The range in desired vs optimum fertility levels shows that some producers are working with a high margin of safety (lambing up to 45% less than their estimated optimum for their farms/areas) which could be having a marked effect on their returns.
- The importance of keeping accurate records of factors such as rainfall and pasture growth - to help producers become more efficient at what they are doing and help them analyse and set benchmarks for fertility and overall lamb productivity – must be stressed.
- There may be a need to improve breeder awareness of the financial and food quality gains to be made with fewer drugs through inherited disease/parasite resistance.

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Objectives

1. Produce high performance, high fertility, worm resistant maternal genetic material through the use of LAMBPLAN and selection for worm resistance irrespective of breed or breed mix (maternal and self replacing); and
2. Develop strategic alliances from maternal sire breeders through crossbred ewe breeders to prime lamb breeders and establish supply and purchase contracts for ewes bred by members rams under the Superewe\$ banner, primarily in southwest Victoria and the south-east of South Australia.

What was done

The Superewe\$ group conducted a survey to determine commercial lamb producer attitudes to factors relevant to the profitability of their enterprise. Producers were surveyed in all lamb producing areas of Victoria and the higher rainfall areas of South Australia. There were 107 responses to the 430 survey forms sent.

This resulted in information from producers in a range of seasonal and pasture growth period areas, using different ewe breeds and production systems to turn off a range of lambs from light domestic trade suckers to later finished heavy export lambs.

Most commercial lamb producers want improved performance in the maternal genetics generally available to them. Fertility, milk production-mothering ability and body size are the traits of most concern.

The survey asked general questions relating to the size of the producers' lamb enterprise, their geographical location and the rainfall in their area, to indicate the population range that responded to the survey. Specific questions were asked about the ewe breed(s) used, what they know about the ewes they buy in, what they look for when buying or, if they breed their own ewes, what they consider when buying their sires.

Questions were also asked about the lambing percentage on their properties and if they were satisfied with their current situations. More specifically, they were asked to list the traits they considered needed improving in their ewe flock.

Information was sought on marketing aspects of the lambs produced, and included target market information, if abattoir feedback was received on the lambs sold, lamb finishing methods and the ranking of the lamb enterprise in the whole farm operation.

Completed survey forms were received from a range of climatic and geographic areas in Victoria and southern South Australia. The rainfall ranged from 400mm/year to 1000mm/year and the pasture growth periods from four months to ten months. Most responses were from prime lamb breeders in the seven to eight month growing period areas.



Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

Contact Stephen Feighan - MLA Project Manager, Producer Delivery and Adoption.

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"It is evident from the replies received that there is a huge opportunity for improvement in lamb marketing with the greatest proportion of lambs produced by the respondents still being sold in the saleyard system," Mr Arey said.

Coupled with this was the lack of feedback information to help producers become more 'market' orientated.

Mr Arey said the possibility existed for alliances to be formed around the Superewe\$ concept with members and allied producers gaining financially through stud breeder to lamb producer contracts.

What happened?

Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes represented 61% of the ewes run by respondents, with Merino ewes being the next highest group at 22%. The balance were mainly Comeback and Corriedale types, Booroola Leicester crosses and Coopworth pure-bred and crossed with Merino. This latter group composed 17% of the total.

About 2/3 of the ewes in respondent's prime lamb flocks were bought in - the balance was home bred.

Of the producers who supplied information, 31 joined ewe lambs to lamb at about 12 months of age. The lambing percentage from these ewes ranged from 45% to 138% and averaged 78%.

Where lambing percentage figures were broken down into one to two-year-old ewes and two-year-old plus ewes, the younger ewes averaged 94% and ranged from 67% to 120%. The mature ewes averaged 116% and ranged from 80% to 160%.

When asked for an indication of the desired fertility levels they would like to achieve, figures ranged from 90% to 200%. The average was 132%. The second part of this section was to give an estimate of the optimum lambing percentage. A similar range from 80% to 200% was given with a similar average of 129%.

When producers were asked to list what they knew about bought-in ewes, 36 said that they knew the breeder and/or the origin of the ewes; 28 said they did not know enough about the ewes they were buying.

Twenty-five producers had some knowledge of the disease and health status of these ewes.

Data was sorted into ewe breeds vs geographic location.

In all locations, except for north-west Victoria and the south-east South Australia, Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes dominate. All producers in Gippsland, Victoria, use Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes only.

For 82% of producers in the north-west of Victoria, Merino ewes made up a considerable proportion of the prime lamb breeding flock. A further 50% of breeders in the same area have at least some Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes.

MLA also recommends Sheep Genetics Australia

Sheep Genetics Australia (SGA) is the national genetic evaluation service for the Australian sheep industry. It is built around the world's most comprehensive sheep genetics database, and will deliver genetic information on a fee-for-service basis.

Tel (02) 6773 2493 or
www.sheepgenetics.org.au

EDGEnetwork

EDGEnetwork offers practical field-based workshops to improve productivity and profitability for the long-term.

Workshops cover breeding, nutrition, grazing management, marketing and selling.

Call MLA on 1800 993 343 or
www.edgenetwork.com.au

In the south-east of South Australia, about 68% of producers run either some Merino ewes or some Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes.

The situation in south-western Victoria is different again, with about 68% of breeders having Border Leicester-Merino cross ewes in their prime lamb flock, along with 45% having ewes of a group of other breeds on their properties.

The ewe breeds in this other category are principally Coopworth, Corriedale and Booroola Leicester-Merino.

Breeders on the Fleurieu Peninsula (SA) also use a significant number of ewes in the 'other' category.

Seven traits were identified as being important.

Fertility was mentioned by 58% as a high priority for improvement. Milking ability was next, followed closely by frame/size/length with improved mothering ability listed by about 30% of producers.

Despite the availability of information in many scientific reports and farm management analysis reports which show that the profitability of a prime lamb enterprise is determined by the number of lambs produced and sold, a number of producers are content to work with extremely low lambing percentages.

Ninety percent lambing is the 'desired level, and 80% is the optimum at the low end of the range, compared to a top of 200%.

Mr Arney said this could be breed or feed resource related with higher lambing percentages governed by available feed. It was important to note that producers in the four-month growing period areas listed fertility as the main trait needing improvement in the ewes they were using.

Discussion

- There is scope for improvement in the fertility of the prime lamb flocks at not only the bottom end of the scale, but at the top as well.
- Selection for higher milk production has not been a major thrust in development of higher fertility breeds and composites up until recent times. The introduction of the maternal weaning weight (dam effect) (mwwt)/weaning weight (direct) (wwt) split by LAMBPLAN, now makes accurate genetic selection for the combined effects of milk production and mothering ability possible in maternal breeds.
- The recent introductions of new maternal genetics into Australia may be of value and help make this trait easier to improve than by selection alone.
- Feed intake is a trait that may not have been considered by producers seeking to breed/buy bigger prime lamb dams.

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- Bigger sheep have a higher maintenance requirement and therefore need more feed.
- Mothering ability needs to be considered in association with improved fertility and milk production.
- The breakdown of estimated turn-off weights indicates that most producers are aiming to turn lambs off at carcase weights above 18 kgs. Most aim for between 18 and 20 kgs. A considerable number of the lambs produced (22%) are sold at carcase weights in excess of 22 kgs.
- Producers use all three marketing options — saleyard, direct over-the-hooks or paddock, but many are not aware of the performance of their lambs or their ewes.
- Performance may be based on a per unit price obtained in the saleyards or from paddock sales, not on the basis of kilograms of lamb carcase marketed derived from objective feedback information.
- The preferred finishing system for most of the lambs produced is to market them as suckers straight off ewes, the balance (42%) are carried over for later finishing.
- The finishing systems vary considerably but are mainly paddock-based.
- Only one producer lot fed lambs although some who fed grain could be very close to lot feeding. Those producers in the longer pasture growth areas (>eight months), finish most of their lambs on either pasture or fodder crops sown specifically for this purpose.
- Producers in the lower rainfall, shorter season areas are mainly crop farmers. They finish their lambs on crop stubbles

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