

2004/S08



Improving Returns from Sheep

Streaky Bay Sheep Group



The Streaky Bay Sheep Group set out to find ways to improve returns from sheep production systems in the district. Areas identified for investigation included nutrition, ram genetics, minerals and deficiencies, dry season management and production feeding. These issues were addressed through general discussion and a series of field days and workshops.

Key Points

- Many young sheep were found to be deficient in cobalt.
- Lambing percentage was increased by an average of 10%, though the average varied between 64% and 107% over 10 years.
- Merino lambs in the district grew up to 250g per day until weaning.

Contact Details

Brent Cronin
RSD 29
Streaky Bay SA 5680

The project

The group aimed to help producers at Streaky Bay increase production and profits from sheep, and to establish the place of sheep in the production system.

Objectives

1. Increase production and profits by 15%;
2. Increase average live weight of lambs by 5kg at eight months of age (market age);
3. Establish the option of producing high quality cross bred lambs for sale to a specialist finisher; and
4. Benchmark production from group members with the aim of establishing production goals.

What was done

The group ran a series of meetings and field days. These activities are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Meeting and Field Day Program

Date	Activity
August 2003	Group discussion and priority setting for PIRD
September 2003	Sheep blood tests taken
April 2004	EDGE ^{network} ® 'Wean More Lambs' workshop
October 2005	Field day on nutrition and lot feeding
February 2006	Group discussion, review and priority setting
September 2006	Sheep blood tests taken
September 2006	Farm walk. 'Pastures and filling the summer feed gap'
August 2007	Sheep blood tests taken

Group members ranked issues in order of importance as:

1. Nutrition;
2. Ram genetics;
3. Mineral deficiencies;
4. Dry season management;
5. Production feeding;
6. Lamb marketing; and
7. Flock health.



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

What happened?

Mineral Deficiencies

In order to determine whether minerals were a problem in their production systems, sheep were tested for deficiencies that could affect growth rate.

1. Cobalt

Lambs traditionally received vitamin B12 injections at marking and then at six week intervals until they could be given a cobalt bullet. Severe cobalt deficiencies were recorded twice during the project, eight weeks after the vitamin B12 injection. Severe deficiencies were also found at marking. Retained ewe lambs therefore required a cobalt bullet to reduce the risk of vitamin B12 deficiency in their lambs. Some ewes were tested at 5½ years old, and the cobalt bullet was still working. In extreme cases, ewes could be injected with vitamin B12 prior to lambing.

2. Copper

The ideal treatment for copper deficiency is copper fertiliser. The group only found copper deficiency on two properties and it was assumed that fertiliser use in the district afforded sufficient copper in most cases. The use of copper fertiliser was not the best long term solution when molybdenum levels were high as it tied up available copper.

3. Selenium

Selenium levels were found to be sufficient, so supplements were not required.

4. Calcium

Although calcium deficiencies were not common, they occurred when sheep were grazed on cereal grain or young cereal crops, without the use of stock lime.

5. Magnesium

Where sheep grazed on cereal crops were not performing, pasture tests may confirm magnesium deficiency. Magnesium could be added to stock lime if found to be deficient.

Worms

Worms were not found to be a major problem but lambs were still drenched at weaning, and then annually, as part of the flock management regime. Other strategies included rotation of drench groups and drenching of all purchased sheep.

Nutrition

Members were interested in ascertaining the nutritional requirements of sheep and lambs. District pasture quality was generally good but the blood samples from poorly performing sheep showed that most young sheep were protein deficient. Since the nutrition of young sheep is critical, weekly supplementation with 1kg of lupins was recommended. Alternatively, poor weaners could be separated from the mob and supplemented with lupins.

The group also found it was useful to have ewes with a condition score of 3 – 4 at mating. As a result, poorer ewes were separated at weaning and supplemented until mating.

Lamb Growth Rate

A number of the group weighed lambs and recorded growth rates. Growth rates varied with some lambs 10kg heavier than others at weaning. One lot of ewe lambs did not gain weight over summer, although the male lambs that had been sent to the feedlot did very well. The difference in growth rate was attributed purely to nutrition.

2004/S08



Meat & Livestock Australia

Level 1, 165 Walker Street
North Sydney NSW 2060

Tel 02 9463 9333

Fax 02 9463 9393

Free Phone 1800 023 100 (Australia only)
www.mla.com.au

Lambing Percentage

The EDGENetwork® Wean More Lambs workshop raised many issues that affect lambing percentage. Nine group members recorded their average lambing marking percentage over the last 10 years. Before the project, lambing percentages averaged 82%. At the end of the project the average for the same group increased almost 1% per annum to 89%.

Genetic Improvement of Sheep

Two EDGENetwork® sheep genetics workshops, Effective Breeding and Money Making Merinos were found to be an learning excellent tool.

Discussion

As a result of the project, the group concluded that sheep had become an important part of their production systems. More emphasis was therefore put on sheep management, which resulted in increased lambing percentages.

Group members adopted a number of changes on their properties, including:

- Sale of wethers and retention of more ewes;
- Reduction of paddock size;
- Maintenance of ewe condition;
- Scanning of ewes and mating of dry ewes to terminal sires;
- Fox baiting;
- Lot feeding to finish lambs;
- Containment feeding to reduce erosion; and
- Use of stock lime.