

2004/N01



First Cross Lamb Production in Fine Wool Merino Flocks

Bathurst Merino Association (BMA)



The project

The project aimed to improve the profitability of lamb production from members flocks by comparing the profitability of different lamb production systems from fine-wool merino sheep and lifting members' skills in the technology of prime lamb production.

Objectives

1. Improve current district average profit from fine wool merino flocks from \$110 per hectare by 10% by efficiently incorporating alternative prime lamb production systems; and
2. Have 20% of members trained in effective breeding (genetics and reproduction) and lamb assessment techniques.

What was done

The project looked at two approaches to taking advantage of the high prices being paid for prime lamb:

1. Using dual-purpose sires such as the Dohne or SAMM, as several local breeders had already done; and
2. The more traditional approach of using specialist terminal sire breeds such as the Poll Dorset or White Suffolk.

The trials took place in four BMA members' flocks. In two of the flocks, the progeny of dual-purpose rams was compared with that from selected specialist terminal sires. In the other two flocks, two groups of terminal sires were compared – one selected using Lambplan genetic information (EBVs) and the other selected visually as no breeding values were available. In addition to the productivity comparison, the sheep consultant firm, Holmes and Sackett, conducted an economic analysis of the data.

What happened?

The progeny of specialist terminal sires selected on their Lambplan genetic values for the target market:

- Were 10% heavier at weaning than the progeny of both dual-purpose rams and visually selected terminal sires;
- Grew 26% and 19% faster than the progeny of dual purpose and visually selected terminal sires, respectively;
- Were 15% and 12% heavier at the time of the first slaughter than the progeny of dual purpose and visually selected terminal sires, respectively;
- An additional 40% and 20% of lambs met slaughter weight specifications at the first slaughter compared to progeny of dual purpose and visually selected terminal sires, respectively; and

In 2005, the Bathurst Merino Association successfully applied to MLA for funding to run a project looking at alternative systems for producing prime lamb from specialist fine wool flocks.

The project aimed to compare two alternate prime lamb production systems for productivity and returns, and update BMA members' skills in the latest breeding (genetics and reproduction) and lamb assessment techniques.

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Producer Research Support

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Contact Gerald Martin – Producer Research Support Coordinator.

Tel 08 8556 2900 or
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- In dollar terms, these figures translated into a net benefit of \$6.72 per lamb or \$45 per ha compared to visually selected terminal sires, and around \$10 per lamb compared to dual purpose progeny.

Two field days were held at two of the trial sites. Speakers from MLA and the DPI discussed ram selection and breeding technologies, and lamb assessment, finishing and marketing. Around 80 BMA members attended these days and feedback from attendees was very positive.

Discussion

Despite the drought hindering lamb performance, there were some important learnings:

- Crossbred lambs from fine wool ewes put on up to 1kg per week, even in such a tough season. In comparison, in a crossbreeding trial conducted in better seasons by the DPI, crossbred progeny from medium wool ewes grew at around 1.4 kg per week; and
- The progeny of terminal sires selected using genetic information targeted to the final lamb market grew substantially faster, finished earlier and produced higher returns both per head and per hectare than the progeny of visually selected terminal sires.

The outcomes from the trial comparing selected terminal sires and dual purpose sires was less clear due to the tough season. Perhaps the progeny of Lambplan selected terminal sires grew faster and reached target slaughter weights earlier than the progeny of dual-purpose sires.

Accounting for the fleece produced by the dual-purpose crosses was a little more difficult. The season restricted lamb numbers and their growth, and only in one flock were the dual-purpose progeny retained until shearing, did not finish and were sold as stores. The gross returns per head favoured the terminal sire's progeny by up to \$10 per lamb.

This result raises the question about whether it would be more beneficial to target the store market rather than the prime market.