

99/N02



Producer Research Support

Border Leicester Association

\$SuperBorder\$ improving maternal genetics



The project

Group secretary Allan Wilson said the initial task was to form and develop the group. The first meetings were held at Keith in South Australia, Temora in New South Wales and Bendigo in Victoria in June and July 1999.

This resulted in the group representing 13 stud Border Leicester breeders being officially formed in October 1999.

Mr Wilson said they were fortunate to also have the assistance of consultant Mike Stephens and LAMBPLAN Development Officer Dr Alex Ball, who became a key adviser and educator to the group.

The following statement set the scene for the development of \$Superborder\$:

"The ultimate objective is to supply satisfying lamb meals to the consumer and the group is a primary supplier of genetics for the chain that leads to that end. The efficiency of this chain is enhanced by fast growth to larger carcass weights that have a high dressing percentage, the right fat cover (no trimming) and good eating quality. The \$SuperBorder\$ group can become preferred suppliers of genetics to this chain and can develop a cooperative alliance that overcomes our disadvantage of being small. We don't have to be big to act big."

Following on from this was the vision of the group:

"To become leaders in the supply of high performance measured maternal sheep genetics and to cooperatively market those genetics to the prime lamb industry."

Product Specification: The first \$SuperBorder\$ conference adopted the use of the 'dollar index' for the specification of genetic merit in their rams. This index had been proposed by Dr Ball, and fitted neatly with the \$SuperBorder\$ name, a development from the earlier \$SuperEwe\$ project, with which some members had been involved.

Mr Wilson said when the project was being planned, the measurement of maternal genetics in the lamb industry was "close to zero" in the main maternal breeds.

"The Border Leicester is the most widely used maternal breed in the industry, yet few breeders were recording the performance of their flocks. Measured performance was having no influence on the supply chain."

Breeders were using LAMBPLAN independently of one another, with a weak understanding of the tools available and how they should be applied.

"There was no market for rams of specified genetic merit. In the absence of any market premium, breeders recording on LAMBPLAN were beginning to question the value of continued involvement."

At the same time, however, leading prime lamb breeders seeking a better prime lamb dam were turning to newer breeds. Border Leicesters were seen as old fashioned, inferior and not doing anything to meet modern market requirements.

Mr Wilson said activities in five key areas provided major dividends:

1. Group development;
2. Product specification;
3. Promotion;
4. Improving genetics; and
5. Developing alliances with first cross and prime lamb breeders.

A group of Border Leicester stud breeders, the Border Leicester Association, set out to develop market information systems and alliances between Border Leicester ram breeders, first cross ewe breeders and prime lamb breeders. They adopted measured performance as a brand prerequisite and successfully positioned their sheep in the prime lamb industry as a result of this project.

The brand is called \$SuperBorder\$.

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Objectives

1. Establish the criteria for Border Leicester rams that are suitable for the program and may be labelled as \$SuperBorder\$. (Sheep to be in the top half of rams, according to the LAMBPLAN index and weight gain);
2. Establish a register of sources and quantity of supply of Border Leicester rams which meet the agreed performance criteria;
3. Determine the demand for first cross ewes bred from \$SuperBorder\$ and their market criteria; and
4. Establish a network of first cross breeders who wish to supply this demand, determine the ways they will meet the market criteria, and detail the means they will use to market their product.

What was done

The group developed rules that covered both the flock (full flock recording within LAMBPLAN to the 'Silver' grade or better) and the rams that could be tagged as \$SuperBorder\$.

For the 1998 drop the cut-off was the breed median for the dollar index, together with limits on fat ($<+1.5Y_{fat}$) and eye muscle ($>-1.5Y_{EMD}$).

Promotion

An integral part of the project was the promotion of the name as a brand. Border Leicester rams had been largely marketed as a commodity bought on price. \$SuperBorder\$ were marketed as a different product – still the recognisable breed that everyone knew, but of higher quality.

Press releases about the group and \$SuperBorder\$ rams were sent to major rural newspapers. In some cases this was accompanied by advertisements. Articles appeared in The Land (NSW), Stock and Land (Victoria), The Rural News (NSW), Southern Weekly (NSW), The Weekly Times (Victoria) and Stock Journal (SA).

Two brochures were printed. The first was a brief description of the sheep and member studs; the second a four-page glossy publication that explained the dollar index, EBVs, the sheep and the value of \$SuperBorder\$ rams to the lamb producer. The second brochure has been reprinted.

A web site was also developed, www.superborders.com, which in future will act as one of the main avenues for the dissemination of information about the group and its rams.

Genetic Improvement

Mr Wilson said one of the key aims of the group was to engage in the continuous improvement of the genetics of their sheep. Since the establishment of the group he said there had been a big increase in the use of rams with higher EBVs and index values.

Rams and semen have been traded between studs and a greater emphasis has been placed on using young sires, including ram lambs. The Young Sires Program was incorporated into the group and has continued with a small number of members. This program is expected to widen now that some of the problems of poor semen quality and low conception have been solved.

Key points

- Following are findings related to the correlation between muscling and structural traits.
- Wider shoulders result in a higher incidence of turned out front feet.
- Sheep with wider shoulders are often more heavily muscled.
- Heavily muscled sheep are often looser in the pasterns.
- Animals with straighter hocks tended to be tighter in the pasterns, and faster growing.

These genetic relationships confirm the value to industry of having an objective structural trait scoring system and EBVs because without them, many breeders will struggle to find a balance between use of EBVs for production traits and their legitimate concerns about structural soundness and functionality.



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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Alliances

The use of first cross ewes for breeding prime lambs involves two breeder groups – the Border/Merino first cross breeder and second-cross prime lamb breeder.

Mr Wilson said it had been difficult to establish these linkages with specialist Border Leicester breeders.

Special first-cross tags carrying the \$SuperBorder\$ name were developed, along with sale cards carrying the words "Bred from \$SuperBorder\$ Rams". "The purpose of these was to aid in identifying the genetics of the first-cross ewe and wether in the market place."

What happened?

Group Development

Membership at the first major meeting was 13 studs. Membership at project conclusion stood at 21 studs.

Mr Wilson said the group was now established on a permanent basis with its own finances and structure.

The group began operation as a committee of the Australian Border Leicester Association. It is now a separate, incorporated Association (\$SuperBorder\$ Inc) with its own rules and by-laws covering membership and ram specifications.

Mr Wilson said \$Superborder\$ was recognised as progressive and able to lead the genetics of the Border Leicester forward to meet future lamb industry requirements.

This image had led to the group being selected as preferred ram suppliers in recent discussions with lamb producers seeking the supply of high index rams on a forward contract basis.

Product Specification

The Dollar Index is being widely used by members of the group to specify the genetic quality of their rams and is increasingly understood by clients.

Member studs are applying about 1,000 tags a year to rams that meet the specifications. These tags are bright yellow button tags that carry the name "\$SuperBorder\$" and a serial number. The serial number does not identify the rams, which have their own separate tags, but allows traceback to the stud and acts as a protection from unauthorised use of the brand name.

Provisional trademark is now registered.

Promotion

Mr Wilson said the name \$SuperBorder\$ was gaining "general currency" within the industry.

During the 2001 selling season, new clients for \$SuperBorder\$ rams emerged as a result of pressure from the prime lamb breeders who buy their ewes.

Mr Wilson said that in the first year of the project, some studs achieved sale premiums of up to \$150 for their \$SuperBorder\$ rams. In the second year, selling conditions were more difficult and premiums were modest.

In the third year the rams with the highest index values have sold at auction for up to \$400 more than low index rams.

This trend continues.



Genetic Improvement

The LAMBPLAN average index for all recorded Border Leicester sheep provides an independent measure of genetic gain in traits of value to the lamb industry.

The gain in the dollar index for the 2000 drop (see Table 1), of nearly 0.8 index points, is almost twice the rate achieved before the formation of the group.

Mr Wilson said given that it takes two years from decisions on ram breeding to the completion of recording on that drop, the group confidently predicts a further rapid rise in the genetic merit of rams bred by the group in the years ahead.

Table 1. Changes in the Dollar Index of the recorded Border Leicesters for the 1994/2000 drop lambs

Year of Drop	\$ Index	\$ Increase
1994	100.27	0.04
1995	100.51	0.24
1996	100.67	0.18
1997	101.08	0.41
1998	101.24	0.16
1999	101.71	0.47
2000	102.50	0.79

Alliances with first-cross and prime lamb breeders: The first meetings with first-cross breeders were marginally successful. Attendance was poor and few understood the value of the concept. No first-cross breeder groups were formed.

However, progress is being made. Mr Wilson said the first-cross tags and sale cards are being used and with demand now coming direct from professional prime lamb breeders, the group expects further adoption over the next few years.

This had been aided by promotion from lamb development officers of the value of buying specified maternal genetics and sourcing these through direct alliances with specialist breeders.

Mr Wilson said independent trials, such as the Maternal Central Progeny Test, which consistently found that the genetics of individual rams has a greater impact on returns than the breed of that ram, was assisting the \$SuperBorder\$ adoption.

The Elmore Field Day trial on maternal breeds, in which the Border Leicester component was bred from \$SuperBorder\$ rams, also promoted the development of vertical alliances.

"The formation of these alliances and the development of contract ram breeding will be further developed by the group in the years ahead," Mr Wilson said.

"The group is in sight of achieving its vision of becoming leaders in the supply and marketing of maternal genetics to the prime lamb industry," Mr Wilson said. "The brand name is recognised in the market place, the rate of genetic improvement is rising, rams are selling on the basis of index values and members are making sufficient returns to consider increasing production."

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

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

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

He said while the group had achieved considerable success not all of that success derived from the group's efforts. There was already widespread adoption within the industry of LAMBPLAN specifications for terminal sires and leading producers were beginning to say that the next improvement would come from the maternal side.

"The framework for success had been set by others and the time was ripe for the \$SuperBorder\$ group to enter the scene."

Much work remained to be done. Mr Wilson said the number of members was still low relative to the breed and maternal industry as a whole. Further advances in breeding technology remained to be adopted and the structure of vertical alliances was still in its infancy.

"The official project may now be over, but the group's activity and growth is just beginning," Mr Wilson said. "We hope that the group's commitment to genetic improvement, to excellence in breeding and marketing, and to continuing change in response to the needs of the lamb industry will lead us to further success in the years ahead."

Discussion

So successful was the group, that Bruce Hancock, SA Lamb Development Officer, described the group as "one of the most exciting groups in the lamb industry".

Allan Wilson described the \$SuperBorder\$ Producer Research Support project as "a most successful project".

"As a result of this project there is now a permanent and growing group of breeders who have become leaders in the supply of high performance maternal genetics to the prime lamb industry.

"These breeders have a greatly improved knowledge of genetics, performance recording and the application of LAMBPLAN, with the result that the rate of genetic gain in their flocks has accelerated."

He said most importantly, the name '\$SuperBorder\$' has become widely known in the industry and is associated with the supply of rams of high genetic merit that will give significantly higher returns to both first and second cross prime lamb breeders.

"Furthermore, these rams are receiving a premium in the market."

He said an added bonus was that alliances between the various segments of the industry were being established and that the value of the improved genetics was flowing through the chain from the seedstock producer to the prime lamb breeder and the lamb processor.

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