95/V09

Producer Research Support

Identifying the 'best bet' lamb finishing finishing system for Victorian Mallee

Murray Mallee Prime Lamb Producers Group Inc.

Prime lamb producers in the Murray Mallee Prime Lamb Producers Group successfully researched the efficiency and productivity of different finishing systems with Producer Research Support assistance.

The project

Inconsistent seasonal supply of prime lambs is generally recognised as a characteristic of the Australian prime lamb industry that needs to be overcome if potential market growth is to be realised.

The Victorian Mallee region, in the far north west of the state, currently produces about one million lambs a year. But the production of large, even lines of lambs in the Mallee is difficult because of low and unpredictable rainfall. Producers are being pressured to produce even lines of larger, leaner lambs more efficiently.

Objectives

Increase the profitability of producing prime lambs in the Murray Mallee by objectively demonstrating, to group members and industry, the relative merits of finishing member produced lambs in traditional dryland, summer irrigation and feedlot systems.

What was done

The Murray Mallee Prime Lamb Producers Group began their Producer Research Support trial to compare the economic and management merits of three finishing systems: traditional dryland on cereal and legume stubbles; summer irrigated clover-based pasture; and lot feeding. Twenty-three producers consigned lambs for the trial which measured the performance and financial returns of prime lamb production under the three finishing systems.

What happened?

Irrigation

Positives

The summer irrigation system removed the constraints of drought and guaranteed a base level of pasture throughout the year.

The high pasture production allowed stocking rates of up to 50 dry sheep equivalents (dse) per hectare between November and March which increased potential profitability. In the 1995–96 season lambs took one-third less time to finish which meant they were laying down fat in the past four weeks.

Negatives

Higher costs, more disease such as liverfluke and footrot, and labor intensive. Monitoring of animals is vital to ensure optimum stocking rates.

Contact details

Chris Dadd
PO Box 149
Parkes NSW 2870
Tel (02) 6862 1000

95/V09

Key points

- Consider finishing options carefully and match management skills with potential returns.
- Use genetically superior, structurally sound sires.
- Use scales to monitor the liveweight of all stock.
- Sell ewe lambs at lower liveweight than wether lambs. They mature earlier and fatten faster.
- Sell lambs as soon as they are in prime condition.
- Monitor irrigated pasture closely — don't allow sward to become rank or overrun with weeds and grasses.
- Monitor dryland stubble closely and test for protein and energy. Be prepared to supplement with grain if stubbles do not meet nutritional needs.
- Allow suitable adjustment period for lambs entering a feedlot. Lambs should be heavier, correctly vaccinated and constantly monitored for health. Monitor for shy feeders, for specialised management.
- Vaccinate all lambs coming from irrigation source farms or saleyards with unknown histories against liverfluke.
- Vaccinate all breeding sheep — ewes and rams — and wethers against cheesy gland, twice within four to six weeks as lambs or after purchase and one annually thereafter.

Traditional dryland

Positives

The traditional stubble finishing system is complementary with dryland cropping. Most growers maintain a three-year rotation of stubble, pasture and crop. No management changes are needed and no variables such as irrigation water or grain rations are needed although supplementary feed is needed in some years.

Negatives

Higher costs, more disease such as liverfluke and footrot, and labor intensive. Monitoring of animals is vital to ensure optimum stocking rates.

Lot feeding

Positives

Lot feeding allows lambs to be finished irrespective of seasonal conditions. Diet and nutrition can be manipulated, which should increase the efficiency of finishing lambs.

Negatives

- High risk of contagious disease.
- Price fluctuations of ration ingredients.
- Two week adjustment to grain suppresses growth rates.
- Shy feeders account for 5–10%.
- When combined with change of diet weight loss can be rapid.

Extra net profits of $6.50 per lamb are achievable in the Victorian Murray Mallee region by better using the pasture resource and through better timing of supplementary feeding.

Lambs are currently turned-off at an average 20 kg. This could be increased to 23 kg. The heavier weight is estimated to attract a premium of about 15 c/kg and increase returns per lamb by $9.50.

These management strategies can also help growers meet increasing demand for heavier lamb carcases.

95/V09

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.

Tel (02) 9463 9245 or
sfeighan@mla.com.au

MLA also recommends

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

Meat and 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

Discussion

A number of growers have already changed their finishing systems and are turning off heavier lambs. An estimated 20,000 heavier lambs are now being turned-off each year.

The research was conducted with the assistance of Victoria's agriculture department.

According to the department's key prime lamb extension officer, the late Bill Easton, the main recommendation to flow from the trial was that producers should consider finishing options carefully and adopt the system that matches their management skills with potential returns.