Project Increasing number of lambs weaned / ewe unit

Producer case study: Daniel Gill (Manager)

Introduction

Sandhurst is a well-established mixed family farming enterprise located in Northampton, Western Australia, and is managed by Daniel Gill. The operation is built on a strong focus on genetics, aiming to optimize productivity, improve flock performance, and increase profitability.

Daniel's participation in the WA's Midwest Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project has allowed him to further enhance his practices, with a primary focus on increasing the number of lambs weaned per ewe unit. Sandhurst utilises best-practice industry recommendations in breeding, feeding, and health management. With an efficient labour force and a robust data-driven approach, Sandhurst adapts to market fluctuations and seasonal conditions, ensuring sustainable farming practices for long-term success.

Image 1 Daniel Gill, primary producer at Northampton WA

Background

Sandhurst is a mixed family farming enterprise located in Northampton, Western Australia. The farm is owned and operated by Daniel Gill, who places a strong emphasis on genetics to drive productivity and profitability. Daniel participated in the WA's Midwest PDS project, which focused on increasing the number of lambs weaned per ewe unit through improved nutrition and the implementation of best-practice industry recommendations.

The enterprise spans 1,200 hectares and operates with a labour input equivalent to 1.5 full-time workers. With a 70:30 crop-to-livestock ratio, Sandhurst runs approximately 1,000 to 1,200 breeding ewes, primarily of the Sandhurst Merino bloodline. On average, sheep graze 50 hectares—a standard maintained across all mobs.

Breedng program

Daniel has invested considerable focus on genetic improvement to support the enterprise's long-term goals. Sandhurst's primary breeding objectives include achieving a weaning rate greater than 100%, improving body weight at 8–12 months of age, and enhancing wool production with a target of 19-micron fleece.

Ram selection is driven by Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs), with key traits including:

- Yearling Weight (Ywt)
- Yearling Clean Fleece Weight (YCFW)
- Yearling Eye Muscle Depth (YEMD)
- Yearling Fat (YFAT)

Ewe selection is conducted through visual assessment, focusing on structural soundness and desirable wool characteristics.

Joining and scanning practices

Joining occurs in early November, lasting over five weeks. Rams are introduced mid-November, with a 2% ram joining rate and currently no use of teasers. The enterprise has been conducting pregnancy scanning for over eight years, assessing both wet/dry status and litter size to inform management decisions. Scanning has been crucial in evaluating reproductive success and identifying where challenges may arise.

Lambing and weaning practices

Following pregnancy scanning, ewes are separated into mobs based on their pregnancy status—singles (50-70%) and twins (30-50%)—to facilitate more efficient feed allocation. Lambing paddocks are well-shaded to protect the ewes and lambs from the elements, and trail feeding is carried out up to three times a week. Target lamb weights at weaning vary depending on seasonal conditions and feed availability, with minimal mortality rates targeted from marking to weaning.

Cull strategies involve assessing ewe lambs at 12 months of age. Dry and cast-for-age (CFA) ewes are culled based on seasonal needs, typically at around 4.5 years of age.this space. This is placeholder text. Please type content here or copy and paste it in this space.

Feeding and nutrition

Ewes are predominantly trail-fed with a combination of wheaten/oaten hay, pellets, and grain, with the support of a summer loose lick program that extends until near weaning. During the summer months, ewes graze on wheat stubble, while weaners graze on lupin stubble. The feed budget includes an annual rollover of 75 tonnes of lupins and 25 tonnes of wheat seconds/barley. Due to seasonal limitations, the property typically does not rely on winter cereal grazing.

Animal health management

A proactive animal health regime is followed to ensure the well-being of the flock. Pre-lambing, ewes are administered vitamin E, GlanEry 7-in-1 vaccine, and drenched as a preventive measure. Lambs are treated at marking with Clik, GlanEry 7-in-1, Scabiguard, and Trisolfen. Weaning procedures include GlanEry 7-in-1 and drenching based on egg count results. Ewes are drenched pre-lambing with rotating spectra, and weaners transition to clean stubbles. Mineral supplementation is provided through cal-mag-salt mixtures, with occasional use of Beachport products to address specific needs.

Challenges and future directions

Major challenges for the enterprise include fluctuating market prices and managing seasonal feed demand. The key goals are to enhance management efficiency and increase production. During periods of cash flow constraints, the first strategy is to sell dry sheep rather than reduce supplements or health inputs, as these are considered critical to the flock's success. Ewe supplementation pre-lambing is non-negotiable.

Technology and tools

Technology plays a vital role in flock management. Sandhurst integrates lambing planners, drought and supplementary feed calculators, and weather forecasting tools to optimize decision-making. The enterprise also utilizes industry apps such as ASHEEP and Lifetime Ewe Management to make informed, data-driven decisions that support improved productivity and sustainability.

Data-driven approach

Since joining the PDS project, Daniel has integrated electronic identification (eID) systems to improve data collection and flock management. This technology has allowed for more precise tracking of key metrics, including pre-joining and scanning birth weight (BWT), body condition score (BCS), pregnancy status, litter size, and greasy fleece weight (GFW). The data on BCS, along with pre-joining and scanning information, has proven vital in determining the ewes' nutritional needs. This enables Daniel to manage feed allocation more effectively, ensuring that ewes receive the appropriate nutrition to maximize conception rates and achieve optimal birth weights for the lambs.

Conclusion

Sandhurst represents a progressive and well-managed mixed enterprise that operates with minimal labour availability. Daniel uses tools and leverages strategic breeding, nutrition, and technology to optimize productivity and flock performance. This approach allows Daniel to adapt to market fluctuations and seasonal conditions, ensuring sustainable practices and profitability in an uncertain market. Continued adaptation to seasonal variability and market conditions remains central to the enterprise's ongoing success.

For further information:

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