Increasing number of lambs weaned / ewe unit

Producer case study: Lloyd Cripps, Blackboy Hill

Introduction

Lloyd Cripps operates a mixed farming enterprise spanning 3,800 hectares in Western Australia. This family-run operation is primarily managed by Lloyd himself, with assistance from his parents when required. Contract labour is engaged for key seasonal tasks, including shearing, crutching, and marking. Lloyd participated in the MLA Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project, which focuses on increasing the number of lambs weaned per ewe unit through precision ewe feeding.

Image 1 Llyod Cripps, primary producer, West Binnu, WA Fleece Weighing

Enterprise overview

The farm integrates both cropping and livestock, with approximately 1,000 hectares dedicated to cropping and 2,300 hectares to livestock. The remaining 500 hectares are made up of remnant vegetation. As of January 1, 2025, the livestock population is 2,300 head, although it typically sits closer to 2,500 head. The sheep operate under rotational grazing principles, with PDS mobs averaging 140 hectares across two mobs. The average paddock size is approximately 65 hectares.

Flock genetics and breeding objectives

Lloyd's Merino flock is a cross of his own lines and Mulga Springs genetics. Key breeding objectives include:

- Wool: Increase yield, greasy fleece weight (GFW), and staple strength (SS)
- Meat: Wean lambs at 30kg; select for yearling weight (YWT)
- Reproduction: Eliminate freeloaders, cull dry ewes, and record the performance of single (S) and twin (T) mobs

While Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) are not actively used for ram selection, visual assessment plays a critical role. Rams are assessed annually, and weaners are classed prior to data collection based on fleece, fibre, and overall structure.

Reproduction management

The joining period for ewes at Lloyd's operation begins in mid-December (around the 15th) and continues until the end of January, lasting for six weeks. The ram percentage is set at 3%, ensuring that an adequate number of rams are available for the flock. Pregnancy scanning has been implemented since 2022 to assess pregnancy status and litter size, including singles, doubles, and triplets. This valuable data helps in managing nutritional needs and making informed breeding decisions. Furthermore, electronic identification (eID) was introduced as part of the PDS program, with Lloyd purchasing his own eID equipment in 2024 to improve data collection and flock management.

After pregnancy scanning in late March, ewes are split into mobs based on their pregnancy status—singles and twins. This division allows for better nutrition management and feed allocation. Lambing occurs in sheltered paddocks, ensuring protection from harsh weather and improving lamb survival rates. Ewes are carefully monitored and appropriately fed to ensure optimal conditions for both the ewes and their lambs.

Feeding and nutrition management

Feeding regimes are adapted to seasonal conditions and food availability. During the summer months, ewes graze a mixture of crop stubbles and dry pasture, while weaners are provided with dry pasture and some perennial grasses. The feeding system includes lick feeders, and the primary feed sources are lupins and oaten hay for roughage. While loose lick supplementation has not been used previously, Lloyd is considering trialling this practice in the future. Winter cereal grazing was introduced in 2024 using corn rye, and expansion of this practice is planned for the coming seasons.

Animal health protocols

Lloyd's animal health protocols aim to minimize health issues and ensure optimal flock performance. Pre-lambing, ewes are vaccinated during crutching to protect them from common diseases. At marking, lambs receive vaccinations, flystrike prevention, and pain relief as part of a comprehensive health management approach. Lambs are given a booster vaccination at weaning.

Parasite control is an essential part of the health program, with drenching performed before ewes are moved onto stubbles for grazing. External fly treatments are administered individually as needed. Additionally, trace elements are now included in 20–25% of the top-dressing program due to past copper deficiencies.

Weaning performance

Lloyd aims for a target weaning weight of 30 kg for both singles and twins, which represents 40% of the standard reference weight (SRW). This target is part of a broader goal to improve lamb growth and survival rates. The mortality rate from marking to weaning is approximately 2%, reflecting the effectiveness of the management strategies and indicating relatively low lamb losses during this crucial growth period.

Data collection & technology adoption

Prior to the PDS project, Lloyd's data collection mainly focused on Greasy Fleece Weight (GFW) and wool test results. Since the introduction of eID technology as part of the PDS, data collection has expanded. Now, in addition to GFW and wool tests, Lloyd collects detailed information on weaning weights, growth rates, and classification of ewes and lambs into singles (S) and twins (T). He also tracks annual data on D (dry), S (single), and T (twin) lambs, enabling more precise management and decision-making regarding flock health, productivity, and culling.

Culling strategy

Lloyd employs a rigorous culling strategy to ensure only the most productive animals remain in the flock. Lambs are culled prior to their first shearing if they exhibit obvious defects such as black wool, undershot jaws, tight skin, wrinkles, or small frames. This ensures that only lambs with desirable traits are retained for further growth and breeding. Mature stock is culled for similar reasons: visible defects, poor performance, or health issues. This proactive approach ensures that the flock remains healthy and productive.

Enterprise challenges and goals

A primary challenge facing Lloyd's operation is maintaining adequate nutrition between scanning and lambing, particularly during the autumn feed gap. This gap can lead to reduced fetal and lamb survival rates if not managed effectively. Lloyd's improvement priorities include refining autumn feed strategies, better feed budgeting, and experimenting with rumen development in weaners. To support these goals, Lloyd plans to trial feeding starch to weaners and monitor their performance through eID.

Economic strategies

When cash flow is tight, Lloyd's first strategy is to reduce the number of wether lambs and older ewes, which helps balance the financial situation without compromising the overall productivity of the farm. Despite this, there are key non-negotiables, including the retention of young stock to preserve genetic improvements, particularly within the nucleus flock.

Industry considerations

Lloyd is a strong advocate for the continuation of live sheep exports and emphasizes the importance of robust industry policy and infrastructure. He believes these factors are essential for the sustainability of the sheep farming industry in Western Australia. He also stresses the need for further industry development and the creation of viable alternatives should live sheep export be phased out.

Conclusion

Lloyd Cripps' enterprise demonstrates a data-driven approach to sheep production within a mixed farming system. Through participation in the MLA PDS project, he has enhanced flock management through precision feeding and electronic identification, enabling more informed decisions regarding breeding, culling, and overall flock health.

Lloyd's breeding strategy, focused on wool quality, lamb growth, and reproductive efficiency, continues to evolve in response to the challenges of running a low-labour, family-operated farm. His focus on visual assessment, selective breeding, and strategic nutrition underpins his commitment to improving productivity and sustainability.

Despite challenges like managing the autumn feed gap and economic pressures, Lloyd is refining his feed budgeting and exploring rumen development in weaners. He remains an advocate for the sheep industry, emphasizing the need for strong industry support, especially in live export policies.

Overall, Lloyd's enterprise demonstrates resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous improvement, positioning it for long-term success in a dynamic agricultural environment.

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