

Producers implementing collaborative predator management to lift lamb survival

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Mansfield Less Predators More Lambs Group presented their findings of the first year of the project at a field day at Mansfield on August 3 to members of the Goulburn Murray Best Wool/Best Lamb Group.

The Mansfield group takes in eight winter and spring lambing Merino and first-cross enterprises in the Mansfield, Goughs Bay, Merrijig, Barwite, Bonnie Doon and Merton areas.

Funded by Meat and Livestock Australia, the producer demonstration site is supported in partnership with Greg Mifsud, National Wild Dog Management Coordinator, and Lucy-Anne Cobby, Australian Wool Innovation Community Wild Dog Control Coordinator.

Project coordinator Dr Matthew Mahoney, Agridome Consultancy, said the area included areas of high wild dog activity.

He said the aim of the project was to improve lamb survival within participating flocks and demonstrate best practice in sheep management practices and predator control.

“We wanted to tick all the boxes for other reasons we would be losing lambs, including blood testing flocks to determine if campylobacter (an infectious disease) was a problem, uniform management using Lifetime Ewe Management principles and implementing a sound baiting program,” Dr Mahoney said.

“Producers began baiting six weeks prior to their lambing dates to create a predator free buffer zone around the lambing paddocks. This was required because the eight properties weren’t neighbouring one another, therefore reinfestation of predators from non-participating properties had to be combatted.

“Each property has a predator management program to record the number of baits and tools used, of which an integral part was use of the FeralScan app which GPS mapped the bait sites and logged sightings and control measures for our private group.”

In the first year, 6110 ewes and 9484 fetuses were monitored under the project.

Dr Anna Manning, Delatite Veterinary, carried out 44 lamb post-mortems with the dead lambs randomly collected during monitoring rounds by the producers.

Of these 18 per cent were found to have been killed by primary predation with a 50 per cent split between single and twin born lambs – although a small subset, it appeared there was no differentiation by predators on birth rank.

A total of 43 per cent of lamb post-mortems were found to have died of from starvation or mismothering with 74 per cent of those from ewes scanned with twins.

Fourteen per cent were found to have died from an undiagnosed infection, Goitre or intestinal torsion while 25 per cent were found to have died from dystocia.

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Dr Matt Mahoney said lamb survival had increased on all properties using predator management programs compared to the previous year from two per cent up to five per cent.

“This equated to potentially an extra \$42,000 income (280 lambs at \$150/head) over the participating farms,” he said.

“We found if single lambs are going to be lost, it is more likely to be from a predator than other causes while multiples were at the main risk of mismothering leading to exposure/starvation.”

Participant Alex Jackson, “Barragunda”, Barwite, recorded wild dog attacks in sheep on FeralScan, notifying group members there were dogs in the area. He observed wild dog numbers escalate during COVID due to the lack of deer hunters in the bush.

“For us FeralScan was great as there is the farm manager, myself as overseer and one other person, and it didn’t matter who was putting baits out, we could go out with the app and know where the baits were with a photo of the bait site,” Alex said.

“We were able to record when and where a sheep kill was.”

Barragunda also uses solar and mains powered electric exclusion fencing around the boundary as a tool against wild dogs and feral deer.

“When we were putting the fence in, we lost 136 lambs in a 10-day period so now we spend the value of 100 lambs on new boundary fence every year and our kills are down to under 100. The best year we had was 2019 when we had 36,” Alex said.

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Senior Wild Dog Controller David Klippel is one of 22 wild dog controllers helping producers maintain pressure on Victoria’s wild dog population.

“There have been a number of factors, including the 2019-2020 bushfires, which have influenced the behaviour of wild dog populations in the state’s east and northeast,” he said.

“Effective exclusion fencing, participation in community baiting programs and engagement with local wild dog controllers are the greatest defences producers can maintain against wild dog encroachment.”

Dr Mahoney welcomed the professional input from DELWP, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and the National Wild Dog Action Plan.

“We have a great resource in David and AWI Community Wild Dog Control Coordinator (Hume) Lucy-Anne Cobby, plus National Wild Dog Management Coordinator Greg Mifsud has helped our producers with wild dog and fox management,” Dr Mahoney said.

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"Greg and David have helped us be really targeted in our bait sites, so we are being more effective with our programs.

"We have had workshops where David has demonstrated baiting and trapping techniques, including the use of Canid Pest Ejector devices."

Goulburn Murray Best Wool/Best Lamb group, coordinated by Dr Kristy Howard, are also running their own three-year Meat and Livestock Australia funded producer demonstration site, "Best practice predator control at lambing", aimed at measuring the impact of new predator management approaches in lamb survival.

Dr Howard said the project was sharing the latest information on predator behaviour, how it impacts on lamb survival and what works or doesn't work when planning to manage predation.

Up to seven sites have used Canid Pest Ejectors (CPEs) before or at the start of lambing over the last three years with some camera monitoring while other sites used improved predator management and measuring the change in lamb survival.

Producers recorded time spent setting the CPEs, with most typically spending 12 hours across 10 weeks.

Dr Howard said lessons learnt included hiding CPEs under debris to avoid non-target species chewing on lure heads, ensuring the ejectors were well oiled and trying alternative lures such as crushed dry cat food.

She said a combination of predator control measures were found to be the most effective in keeping predation down to less than one per cent losses in most flocks.

For More Information, contact the PDS Facilitator:

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