

PDS: Lotsa Lambs – Improving Reproduction Success

The Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) called Lotsa Lambs ran its first workshop on 28th June 2022 in Don Bottrall's shearing shed, followed by a visit to Alison Henderson's farm which is one of our Lotsa Lambs PDS sites. Guest speakers for the day were Michelle Cousins, Cousins Merino Services, Andrew Michael, Leahcim Stud, Snowtown and Alison Henderson, Caltowie.

Michelle Cousins shared her extensive experience on how to get the most from pregnancy scanning including benefits of splitting single and twin bearing ewes and managing smaller mob sizes at lambing. She said that pregnancy scanning gives producers a good indication of reproduction potential which allows them to realise any production loss that is occurring and manage those factors accordingly. It provides the baseline data to make decisions to improve productivity. Twin lamb survival rates is where Michelle sees significant losses and therefore potential gains to be made in this area with the feed on offer (FOO) being a crucial factor for twin bearing ewes. EID use can provide easier management of underperforming ewes when it comes to reproduction success. Michelle showed evidence from research of a direct correlation between larger mob sizes and reduced lamb survival in the order of a 2-2.5% reduction in survival for every 100 ewe increase. Around the 200 ewe mob size was recommended to reduce mismothering. Paddock type is very repeatable for lamb survival, for example 130% survival will be repeated year after year and can be used in decision making around management of lambing mobs.

Andrew Michael brought a wealth of knowledge to the day and shared his experience in genetic improvement in sheep. In Andrew's opinion, flock profiling is money well spent. He showed evidence of profitability as a result of selecting on genetics and how we can use our flock profiling results to value add. As a start, undertaking flock profiling on lambs or hoggets was recommended, followed by ram selection accordingly and then re-testing 3 years later to track genetic progress. Hoggets need to be DNA tested before classing to ensure a true representation of your current genetics. Andrew ran through a demonstration of interpreting flock profiling results and use of the RamSelect App. He said that ram selection is arguably the biggest genetic gain in your flock and use of ASBV's can speed up genetic improvement, however phenotype still needs to be considered in the selection process. Since the workshop, a group of nine producers have decided to do flock profiling on their sheep and we will meet at the beginning of September with Andrew to guide us through interpretation of results and set a clear breeding objective.

Alison Henderson also presented at our workshop giving an insight into their business and sheep enterprise and sharing her experiences with improving genetics in her flock. Alison emphasised the importance of establishing a clear breeding objective. She said that if she is going to push for improved reproduction there will be sacrifices in other areas, but the breeding objective ensures a balance is met. Management of her flock is based on Lifetime Ewe Management Principles (LTEM) and most of the concepts discussed during the workshop have already been adopted by Alison giving the group a great practical overview of benefits of best practice in sheep production. We visited the PDS site nearby to Don's shed where electric fencing has been used to reduce paddock size in order to run lambing ewes in smaller mobs. Water points were placed in the middle of paddocks, parallel to the electric fencing, running the wire across the trough which has worked well for the lambing period.

UNFS has implemented two demonstration sites for PDS: Lotsa Lambs so far, sheep producers Alison Henderson located near Caltowie and Andrew Kitto near Gladstone. Sheep were pregnancy scanned and split into single and multiple bearing ewes. The scanned multiples were then split into smaller mobs for

lambing. Lamb marking and weaning data will be collected for each mob to assess lamb survival rates as a result of these management practices. The aim of these two sites is to demonstrate that the adoption of best management strategies including pregnancy scanning and selective management of singles and multiples as well as smaller mob sizes at lambing for multiple bearers, can improve the reproductive performance of sheep flocks in the Upper North of South Australia.

Two additional sites will be established next year as part of PDS: Lotsa Lambs, focusing on ewes in confinement. These sites will be located at Calebs Girdham's, Melrose and William and James Heaslip's Appila and aim to demonstrate the selective management of single and multiple bearing ewes in containment using condition scoring and targeted feeding in order to increase lamb and ewe survival rates.

Workshops, field days, site visits and case study reports over the next two years will provide a learning opportunity around improving sheep reproduction success for sheep producers in the Upper North. If you'd like any additional information about the project or would like to be involved, please contact Project Officer - Rachel Trengove, 0438452003, rachel@unfs.com.au

Rachel Trengove

