

Preparation creates fertile ground for more lambs

▲ The PDS has been popular amongst producers, with strong attendance at field days on participating farms.

Joining ewe lambs provides producers with an opportunity to increase profitability from their existing flock – but the success of this practice hinges on the right approach.

In response to producers facing varied results from joining ewe lambs, an MLA Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) in southern NSW is implementing strategies to optimise results.

Since 2023, 21 producers have been refining their on-farm practices through the PDS to either begin joining ewe lambs or improve their success with this strategy.

Factors which discourage producers from adopting the practice include concerns about its impact on ewes' lifetime growth, performance and lamb survival rates.

However, utilising decision-making tools and understanding the additional management requirements and timing of these helps overcome these challenges to increase productivity and lamb survival.

Here, PDS coordinator Sally Martin from SheepMetriX outlines some of the management strategies being explored to help set producers on the right path.

Consider your calendar

According to Sally, producers can use a range of strategies to support ewe lambs to get back in lamb on their second joining.

"Ewe lambs are often joined later and have their lambs later in the season, outside the peak pasture growth curve, with weaning potentially over summer," she said.

"For the progeny, it is more challenging for them over the summer months, while the ewe lambs have a shorter window between weaning and the next joining to get back into condition.

"One of the first things we work through with producers is their production calendar,

and how we might be able to shift and manipulate it to work this practice into their overall production system."

Rather than look to absolute weight targets at weaning for the ewe lamb progeny, Sally suggested setting a firm date to begin weaning, to give the ewes a guaranteed minimum recovery period before joining.

"This practice needs to be in conjunction with getting the weaners onto supplementary feed well before weaning and having the mindset that both the weaners and ewe lamb dams will need to be fed over summer," she said.

Determining standard reference weights

The standard reference weight (SRW) of a flock is the liveweight of a fully grown, bare-shorn, non-pregnant sheep in condition score three with no gut fill (i.e. empty).

Producers can use SRW as a decision-making tool when joining ewe lambs, particularly around nutrition management and setting weight targets.

"It's important to understand the capabilities of your ewe lambs. Every flock is different, so your decision to join may not be based on weight, but a percentage of your standard reference weight.

"We've been working with producers to help work out the SRW of their flock so we can set targets at key times in the reproduction cycle and determine what they need to be doing to keep their ewes on a rising plane of nutrition – increasing body weight and looking at growth rates," Sally said.

"At the end of the day we want to maximise ewe pregnancy while setting them up to ensure lamb survival."

A tool for everyone

Throughout the three-year PDS, producers of various breeds of sheep have been tuning into webinars and attending field days led by the SheepMetriX team to learn how the PDS is progressing, and what strategies are being used.

"All of the principles of good ewe management still apply, we're just tailoring them to a younger animal," Sally said.

As part of the PDS a decision support framework will be developed outlining the skills, knowledge and management factors to evaluate whether joining ewe lambs is the right decision for them.

Sally said preparation from the beginning will leave a producer with more options.

"If it's part of your breeding objective, you need to prepare your ewe lambs for joining from weaning, or earlier. If they're in the right condition and weight, you have the choice to pull that lever and be ready, rather than opportunistic and unprepared." ■

TOOLBOX

➔ Click or scan the QR code to get involved with this PDS:

➔ Find a PDS to join: m1a.com.au/PDS

➔ Click or scan the QR code to access MLA's joining ewe lamb decision support tool:

➔ Learn more about SRW (module 10) and other tools to manage sheep: makingmorefromsheep.com.au



Sally Martin sally.martin@sheepmetriX.com.au Alana McEwan amcewan@m1a.com.au

Ewe lambs step on production accelerator

Joining his ewe lambs has helped southern NSW producer Dean Bourlet reach productivity goals in his seedstock and commercial enterprise. The practice has not only accelerated genetic gain and strengthened his flock management, but has also delivered an added bonus through improved cash flow from surplus stock sales.

Dean manages ewes, ewe lambs and trading cattle alongside his Poll Merino stud, which focuses on performance-driven genetics.

He joins ewe lambs annually and sells progeny through an annual ram sale.

The success of the practice demonstrates Dean's confidence in his flock's genetic merit, as well as the commercial viability and benefits of ewe lamb joining within a stud framework.

"As a seedstock producer, ewe lamb joining is an exciting opportunity to speed up the genetic advancement of my stud and identify the next generation of top rams up to two years earlier than traditional systems," he said.

Wanting to further progress his operation, Dean joined the 'Optimising ewe lamb joining outcomes' MLA Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) – see previous page. Through the PDS, he is exploring and testing ideas and benchmarking the results as part of a producer network.

Keeping a close eye on the flock

For many producers, finding success in joining ewe lambs means adjusting production processes to meet their joining and lambing requirements, which differ from ewes.

"I think because of this, an added benefit of joining my ewe lambs is keeping a closer eye on my livestock," Dean said.

He monitors ewe lambs for weight gains and any animal health concerns.

"If you're not joining ewe lambs, you might not be watching them as closely," he said.

From strategic planning and ongoing monitoring, Dean has made several changes to his management in response to joining ewe lambs and broader seasonal conditions.

"I've invested in improved pastures and adjusted the timing of my fodder crop sowing to better fill feed gaps throughout the year," Dean said.

With the ongoing dry period, feeding programs have become more structured, working backwards from the desired joining weight to where they currently are, and establishing how much weight they need to be gaining each day.

"I'm also setting specific paddocks aside to ensure younger stock are well supported."

Being part of a PDS

During the PDS, Dean has been able to focus on making small improvements to his ewe lamb management that add up over time.

"Being part of the project has reinforced the need to not only develop a plan, but to follow through with an action," he said.

"This mindset has helped me to sharpen my approach to decision making and long-term planning within my operation.

"There is a lot of value in learning from others in the project and sharing our experiences." ■



DEAN BOURLET –
Harden, NSW



AREA
480ha

ENTERPRISE
950 mature-age ewes, 430 ewe lambs
and 200 trading cattle

PASTURES
Improved pastures back to native hills

SOILS
Granite

RAINFALL
640mm

First steps to joining ewe lambs

Here are Dean's top tips to get started with joining ewe lambs



Lower risk entry point: For producers in a commercial system, start by joining ewe lambs to a small, crossbred ram and using the progeny as trade lambs.



Map out a plan: Successful ewe lamb joining starts before joining time. Start planning at birth, considering nutrition and management from day one.



Feeding is non-negotiable: Regardless of the season, good condition is essential. While targets would ideally be achieved on pasture, feeding may be required in dry conditions.



Dean Bourlet kambahpollmerino@icloud.com Alana McEwan amcewan@mla.com.au