Turning eID data into superior home-bred rams

Producer case study: Rohan Vaux

Optimising time of lambing in a variable climate

Rohan Vaux is a 5th generation sheep and crop farmer in Mindarabin, around 350km south-east of Perth in Western Australia. Mindarabin has highly variable rainfall, averaging 350mm annually but ranging from 200mm in dry years to 500mm in wet years. The Vaux family manage around 4400ha of owned land and 1000ha of leased country, which forms a rotation of canola, lupins, cereals and pasture.

Rohan returned to the farm in October 2016 along with his twin brother Beau after finishing school and completing an auto electrical apprenticeship and since then has been managing the farm's sheep enterprise. The Vauxs run a 100% merino enterprise totalling between 2300 and 3000 breeding ewes depending on the season, and sow around 4500ha of crop each year.

To better align with the climate variability, Rohan shifted their time of lambing from March to late June and early July a few years ago. This has had a dramatic impact on the amount of supplementary feeding required during lambing. "One of the challenges there was that we were constantly feeding ewes and lambs if there was no break, until we got some green pick," Rohan said. "In the wetter years sheep were lambing down in puddles so we struggled to get to them to feed them in order to maintain their condition."

This is in stark contrast to dry years, when water needed to be carted to lambing paddocks. The Vauxs attempted to find a location for a bore to rectify this issue but haven't yet been successful. "We've dug a heap of holes with a drilling company to try to find some underground water we could put through a desalination plant, but the water we found was 4 times saltier than what the meter could read, so that didn't really work out because the yield we'd get off it would be way too low," he explained.

Changing their time of lambing has removed the reliance on summer rain or an early break to fill dams and has better matched sheep nutrition requirements with what is available in the paddock.

Using data to set the direction

The Vauxs' merino flock is split into a commercial flock and a nucleus flock of around 180 ewes from which they are able to breed their own highly productive rams, which are supplemented with one or two rams purchased in each year. Rohan changed their genetic direction several years ago from a wool focused sheep to a more dual purpose type. "We're wanting to push that fat and eye muscle depth for our lambs. All of our wether lambs go straight to an abattoir so we're trying to achieve a faster growing merino lamb," he said.

In 2018, Rohan completed a Flock Profile analysis of his flock. A Flock Profile is a genetic benchmarking tool that compares a flock's breeding values with the national average for Australian merino sheep. It provides average breeding values across a range of traits and indexes, helping producers assess their flock's genetic strengths and weaknesses. These traits

include fleece weight, fibre diameter, post-weaning weight, eye muscle depth, and worm resistance, among others. The results have allowed Rohan to set measurable targets to meet his breeding objective.

“When we did the Flock Profile test we were sitting around 160 on the dual purpose index for out lambs so I wanted to get that up to 185,” he commented. Rohan is planning to get the test redone in 2026 to assess their genetic progress over the last 8 years.

The Flock Profile test has given Rohan a new perspective on the value of rams he purchases in for the stud. “When we were first getting into Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) I realised so many rams at the sales weren’t as good as our Flock Profile results, and there was no reason for us to buy them. So now with our ram buying we get the catalogue early and identify a couple of rams that will suit and then we go hard for one or two rams at the sale,” Rohan said.

According to Rohan, the shift to a nucleus flock has fundamentally changed how they assess and retain rams. “Since starting the nucleus, we’ve become a lot more brutal – if a ram we’ve bought at a sale isn’t as good in one or two years’ time, he’ll go. Especially if we can breed one better from the nucleus,” he said.

Another target Rohan set was getting their lambing percentage to over 100% every year. In 2017 their lambing percentage was 85% lambs marked to ewes joined. This jumped up to 95% in 2018, and has been over 100% every year since then despite several challenging seasons.

When asked what strategies helped them achieve this improvement, Rohan said it was a number of factors. “A combination of moving lambing, the new genetics, and probably a bit more concentrated management. Smaller mobs, smaller paddocks, and we probably just concentrated our feeding better to match the ewe’s requirements. The Lifetime Ewe course certainly helped with a lot of that,” he commented. “We weren’t twinning before then either, so identifying the twin bearers and being able to get them going out of confinement a bit earlier has made a bit of a difference.”

Easy data capture through eIDs

Rohan has been using electronic ID tags in his nucleus flock for the past 5 years to make data collection easier. Rohan has focused mainly on weight gains and fleece traits, using his ram buying decisions to improve on the harder to measure traits such as eye muscle and fat depth.

Rohan collected a fleece weight and wool test on all of his rams in order to identify and cull the poor performers. “I made my own price grid out of the fleece weight and micron data so I was able to cull anything out of the nucleus that wasn’t performing,” he explained. “Some of them were quite surprising with how low or high they were.”

With that exercise proving successful, Rohan will use the same test on all maiden ewes as they enter the nucleus. To compliment this, lamb weights are taken at marking, weaning and post weaning to develop a growth rate picture, and overall this data will give Rohan an idea of the merit of each ewe. “I’m hoping in the future we’ll be able to class in our maidens with more of the data that we’ve collected, instead of basing our selection decisions just on what a sheep looks like on the day,” he said.

Targets for the future

Rohan watches sheep markets closely to inform his decision making when it comes to turning off more lambs or increasing their number of replacements. “We’re definitely building our numbers this year with sheep prices increasing and cropping margins being a bit tighter,” he said.

Rohan credits some of his sheep enterprise’s recent progress to the guidance provided by external consultants. “Having consultants as part of our decision making has really helped us learn to be more brutal,” he said, reflecting on how they no longer allow maidens a second chance if they scan dry in their first year following advice from their livestock consultant.

Looking ahead, Rohan is hoping to boost the productivity of his flock by increasing their stocking rate. “Pushing DSE makes the sheep enterprise look a lot better from a gross margin point of view. We’re pushing towards 9 DSE this year which might change depending on the break of season – some of the canola pastures might get turned out to pasture if it doesn’t rain early enough,” he explained.

Rohan is considering investing in genetic testing to bolster his selection decisions in his nucleus ewes and rams. Genetic appraisal will give Rohan the ability to make selection decisions earlier and more accurately, which will carry his rate of genetic gain a step further. This will start with redoing the Flock Profile test on this year's lambs to refocus his genetic targets based on the new Sheep Genetics indexes.

Rohan also needs to assess the historical data he has collected and determine how he can use it more strategically to inform selection decisions. "I've got a lot of data but need to get most of it into a useable order," he said.

Breeding rams via their nucleus flock has been a journey of continuous learning for Rohan. While the process can be complex, Rohan is determined to keep it as simple as possible with the rewards being clear from their progress so far. "There are so many variables in breeding your own rams, but it is really interesting to me and there's a fair bit more to learn," he reflects. With a focus on data, Rohan can continue to make smart selection decisions which will strengthen the quality of their flock over time.

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