

Efficiency leads to profitability

INCREASING productivity and efficiencies is a driving force for the Morgan family at Three Springs in their mixed enterprise of cropping, AMS Merinos and Shorthorn cattle.

The current focus in their Australian Merino Society sheep operation is on increasing weaning percentages from a respectable 100pc+ to 150pc.

Craig's father Ray was first introduced to AMS genetics whilst shearing at an AMS members' property in 1970.

Ray was impressed with the AMS sheep so he purchased a ram from the member who had already used it twice in his breeding program.

Since then the Morgans have been AMS members and have managed a ram breeding cooperative.

Craig believes that one of the benefits of the group breeding scheme is the wide base of genetics available to select replacement stock from.

"Due to our higher lambing percentages, the greater numbers that we objectively measure enable us to retain more productive sheep for the traits that we test for," Craig said.

The Morgans initially measured body weight and fleece characteristics including micron, CVD and fleece weight.

They have now also added testing for staple strength, staple length, average fleece yield and are muscle scanning for eye muscle and fat depth.

The Morgans are also participating in the Merino Validation Project that has been run by MLA over the past three years.

"Whilst we are yet to see all of the results, it has been interesting to be a part of this trial which is benchmarking the Merino for meat and wool characteristics," Craig said.

"In our environment there isn't the profit in wool that there used to be – there's now more profit from meat."

"The money from surplus sheep is also quite good so we are also paying extra attention to this market."

"For us, increasing lambing percentages directly increases profit," Craig said.

"We are currently investigating increasing twinning rates and the survival of the lambs from conception to weaning."

The Morgans are actively pursuing the avenue of fertility and mothering ability and are looking to achieve better than 60pc twinning in one mating.

Due to the logistics of single sire mating in the ram breeding flocks, following scanning the Morgans aren't able to separate these groups into single and multiple foetus bearing ewes for lambing, however in the commercial flock after pregnancy scanning, the ewes are able to be divided into management groups of single and twin-bearing ewes to help maximise lamb survival.

"AMS has always been known for its high lambing percentages," Craig said.

"This has been a direct factor from big sheep with higher bodyweights.

"I guess by increasing twinning and lamb survival we are taking it to the next step."

The Morgans say that this season they have already achieved better than 110pc lambing over all females mated, including maidens.

In the single sire groups, one ram mated to 86 ewes, produced 106 lambs at marking (123pc).

"We've tagged 10pc more lambs from sheltered areas (tagasaste) than those lambing in the open," Craig said.

Craig said that some of the northern AMS breeders have participated in a MLA PIRD to research factors to increase lambing percentages.

"We have been investigating areas such as ram percentages at mating, focus feeding, and protection during lambing versus lambing in the open to see how we can improve the survival from conception to weaning," he said.

"Dr John Milton has also been involved in the PIRD providing advice and oversight of the trial

program."

The Morgans follow AMS recommended procedure of testing the rams at shearing time and then retesting prior to the mating program to ensure they are using the best rams available.

They have also increased their progeny testing program from five to 13 rams this year.

Lambs are tagged within a few days of birth and then mixed back with their group so they can be accurately measured against each other.

"Progeny testing is the true test of a ram's genetic merit," Craig said.

"This is a real test of what the ram can do."

The Morgans believe that it is important to ensure that their clients are well informed by making all test results available to them to help them make their selection decisions.

The Morgans have also been trying to maximise efficiencies in the paddock with new pastures.

Last year they began planting pastures to increase production and have enhanced this with rotational grazing and the planting of new perennial subtropical pasture this year.

"We've planted another four varieties of rye grasses this year," Craig said.

"Although the seed cost is high it is well worth it and this year we've planted varieties specifically to harvest for seed."

"We manage our grazing to ensure the ewes are in good body condition score all year round which helps lambing percentages too," Craig said.

While the Morgans believe the industry is getting tougher they see it as an exciting challenge which requires producers to adapt and improve profitability to stay in the game faced with increased costs.



Ray (left) and Craig Morgan watch on as one of their AMS rams is shorn. The Morgans are Australian Merino Society members and manage a ram breeding cooperative and say that their current focus is to further increase their already high weaning percentages.

"Basically we are trying to increase efficiencies from the numbers we have," he said.

"Everything is heading towards increased management to gain efficiencies.

"There's no silver bullet to suddenly increase revenue so every little bit helps."

Craig believes that sheep combined with cattle and cropping makes a complete enterprise.

"To many wheatbelt farmers sheep have generally been second in priority to the main enterprise of cropping," he said.

"There will always be a place for livestock as nothing is sustainable on its own and it's good to have diversity.

"With AMS sheep we have several strings to the bow, fine wool (our adult sheep are 18 micron), good body weight and an excellent lambing percentage.

"Combined cropping and livestock make a complete mix, complementing each other and maximising farm production."