

# AMS flock opens up opportunities

THE decision to go down the path of breeding an AMS-genetically infused Merino and Poll Merino flock has opened up a lot of opportunities for fourth generation mixed farming operators Ashley and Lucille Hobbs.

The couple runs 1650 hectares of arable country in the reliable rainfall shire of Brookton.

Annually about 50 per cent of the property is cropped to wheat, canola and barley, with the rest set aside for the 1150 AMS breeders and 1400 commercial ewes.

Ashley said his father was using AMS bloodlines when he came back to the family farm after his schooling years.

"I decided to host a wether trial on our property shortly after finishing tertiary studies to see how our stock compared to others in our local area," he said.

"This led to progeny testing of sires in our flock."

Today all AMS progeny on the Hobbs property have sire pedigree records through single sire matings and the next stage is the use of Pedigree Match Maker to get full pedigrees and hopefully that will be beginning next year.

This will require the electronic tagging of all lambs at marking time for easy progeny recording purposes.

"The biggest hurdle we will be facing is finding a lure that will encourage the ewes to go into a pen for the panel reader to record the tags during the winter period," Ashley said.

"At this stage I am going to try a mineral supplement and or a lick feeder with lupins, I hope one of these might be our answer."

All sires are progeny tested on the property and with the use of MerinoSelect, a genetic analysis system,



**AMS breeder  
Ashley Hobbs,  
Brookton**

Ashley selects the top 10 to 12 rams annually to keep as future sires for the AMS breeding flock.

"When selecting flock sires a strong emphasis is put on the Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBV)," Ashley said.

"The up and coming rams must have figures equal or better than their sires to be joined to a selection of our AMS ewes."

When selecting the rams Ashley believes visual appraisal and figures go hand in hand.

"A visual appraisal won't override a good index value, but a good index value won't override an animal with poor structure," Ashley said.

As many as 480-550 young AMS rams on the Hobbs property are carried through to be evaluated with the help of MerinoSelect ASBVs each year.

Of those that are measured, the bottom half are sold as shippers and the remaining rams are made available for ram breeding services.

Ashley offers around 200 rams each year to predominantly AMS members. Non members are more than welcome to call to discuss how the system operates. It is vital that Merino breeders are given good information of the rams they buy.

The Hobbs AMS rams are

sourced by breeders from as far as Merredin, to Rock Gully through to Grass Patch.

Ashley said AMS members get first priority of the rams on distribution day, although membership is not prohibitive and is valuable to gain the best genetics.

"A few weeks before the day producers are sent out an order form which gives them the opportunity to choose the rams that suit their price bracket and breeding requirements," he said.

On the order form breeders have a choice of Poll Merino or Merino and have the opportunity to select the grade/grades of ram.

Ashley then selects teams of rams that are equal to the

average index value from whichever group the commercial breeders have selected from.

Ashley decides on the rams which he believes will suit the breeders in relation to the order form they have filled out, but Ashley said at the end of the day the buyer has the final say.

"I'm just trying to make the selection process easier for the client," he said.

"The AMS rams which end up in the top 15pc for their index values are classed as our top grade rams and they have a reserve price value of \$1000.

"The remaining AMS commercial rams are reserved at \$500.

"We have worked out our cost of production for the ram breeding operation and we are aiming to give value for money."

The remaining rams on the Hobbs property that have not been purchased by breeders are sold direct to the live export industry.

Mating season starts on February 14, later than normal for the area, and Ashley said it has nothing to do with romance but more with the lack of feed when it comes to lambing.

"A few extra weeks makes

a big difference to the pasture growth for our hard working ewes and young lambs," Ashley said.

"By implementing this I think we have been reasonably successful in getting our animals to close the gap between phenotype and genotype.

"We have the systems in place to get our weaners through the leaner summer and autumn months."

On the family property the AMS ewes are split into two main mobs but are always run under very similar conditions.

Before the four-week mating period approaches the two main flocks are split up into 20 smaller flocks and with the use of electronic tagging system the ewes are allocated a mating mob.

Ashley records the rams by their individual tags and the specially selected AMS sires are split up into single sire groups and are run with the ewes at a 2pc joining rate.

Artificial insemination is occasionally used when warranted and when it fits the situation and to remain linked to the Australian database.

Ashley keeps his top 40-50pc of ewe lambs as replacement ewes; however they must be equal to or

better than other breeders in the flock.

"The next 25pc will go into the existing commercial flock on the family property and the remaining surplus are sold to other sheep producers as long as they suit their breeding requirements," Ashley said.

"AMS ewes have long been held in high regard as prime lamb mothers, partly due to bodyweight always being in the selection index, so they are sought after."

The dry ewes are culled from the commercial flock if they are dry after their second joining and then on age.

Ashley said they like to give four lambing opportunities to each ewe, which takes them to six years of age.

The AMS bloodline has long been selected for plain-bodied sheep and this gives Ashley and Lucille Hobbs the confidence to start to apply the non mulesing approach over the past 12 months.

Ashley emphasised that a non-mulesing flock isn't just a case of selecting for bare breech. Dag and wrinkle scores are taken, worm resistance checked through individual worm egg counts and culling for excessive urine stain.

As yet the family hasn't run

into any major flystrike problems and believes they have the structures in place to make major problems highly unlikely.

Ashley said it was suggested to them that they should stop mulesing by the AMS executive, at the same time as they had already decided too.

"The Australian Merino industry bred wrinkles into the breed so there is no reason why we can't breed it out," he said.

Ashley said in the long term the industry will have to stop mulesing, and it should lead to better sheep husbandry and healthier sheep.

"I want to be in the situation where we are breeding the sheep that are easier to manage to help the situation," he said.

"We have had a long association with the AMS bloodline in our flock and we will keep using AMS genetics because I agree to the principal of objective measurements," Ashley said.

"AMS has always selected on traits that have been economically important and I believe they have always been heading down the right track."



the australian merino society inc. 'generations ahead'

For more information contact **Ashley Hobbs 08 9642 1379 / 0429 421 379**

Website [www.ausmerino.com.au](http://www.ausmerino.com.au)

