



AMS NEWS

The Australian Merino Society

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President's Report



Ashley Hobbs

Well, the sheep meat industry is reasonably buoyant, though there are signs that many sheep producers have had difficulty finishing prime lambs and there are plenty of store animals being unloaded ahead of an earlier than normal sucker season in WA, judging by industry reports.

Then there is the wool market which is its normal confusing self which goes to show why we have to get smarter to return reasonable profits from wool growing.

Now that is something that AMS members have been good at in the past, being smarter, as is shown by the fact that we have measured animals for the best performers on profitability to breed from. Now we need to form alliances and relationships with different groups that will help us increase returns. If groups of AMS growers can band together they will be able to provide a product that is genetically the same and then it will be up to members to get systems into place to ensure that a uniform as possible product has been sent out the farm gate. Whether ownership is held past the farm gate will be up to each group, remember the longer that ownership is maintained, the higher the returns and also the higher the risk. In most situations expertise will need to be sourced, and provided for, and very careful planning done.

I have a third hand example of this not quite happening, so make of it what you will. A beef supplier arranged with a major supermarket chain to supply their branded product for the retailer's shelf. The retailer had good experience and asked for beef to be also supplied to be branded with the house brand. The house brand is sold at a cheaper price. Next the retailer claims the suppliers branded product isn't selling very well and they will have to renegotiate their product price. Not a very nice story is it. So attention to detail and business smarts will be very important to progress any venture.

Recently whilst considering the new breeds of sheep that have come into the country and appear to have become fashionable to sheep growers as they search for greater returns, I wondered what place was there in the marketplace for AMS and how are we going to sell our product. Here I will state that I'm no expert on what all these breeds may offer, just my rationale in how I have decided that where I am with our flock makes the best sense to me.

First of all you need to know what you already have. Then decide what direction you might want to head, always keeping in mind both short and long term profitability.

Is that direction having meat sheep because wool is so marginally profitable? Okay what options are there - woolled sheep that need shearing and fleece shedding sheep. In the later you can have sheep whose markets are predominately live export driven, that's a narrow and potentially threatened long term market as more and more public sentiment finds it unpalatable. That's just a little too much uncertainty for me!

Well there are breeds that can go for the local market. Great, no shearing, crutching or flystrike treatments required. All you have to worry about is high weaning percentages and meeting weight and condition score requirements for your market. One product, one hassle and one market. Just hope the lambs marked holds up as there is no other product to sell. I guess the shedded wool/hair must be biodegradable eventually, right? So you can go back to high quality wool with no contamination if it doesn't work out. So all that is required now is to buy full blooded animals or cross all the way to full blood. Just a few years of harvesting poor quality wool.

Let's look at the other option for meat sheep, the woolled option and having another product to sell. We naturally go back to having the cost of shearing and crutching. So the return from wool sales need to cover these costs which are always increasing. Well there are the South African merino strains that have good carcass qualities and high weaning percentages aren't there.

From what I understand there is less wool and it is of an inferior quality to what AMS sheep currently have. It goes to reason that wool net returns will be better with AMS. Some might think the extra carcass value will cover this poorer income from wool. Well I know first hand that you can get prime lamb prices for our AMS lambs, so that isn't valid. It should be remembered that almost all merinos are going to need more than just running on pasture to finish properly for slaughter.

Okay why not get more wool onto sheep, which will help cover shearing costs and be more profitable. Well we also know if you are going to do that in a hurry a number of things are going to happen. If you increase CFW generally bodyweight is reduced. Increased CFW generally also means less eye muscle which is likely to drop you back to merino lamb prices because of poorer yielding carcasses resulting in less return per carcass of equal weight. Another loss is in lambing percentages as fertility and fecundity are reduced with higher CFW generally. Yes there are always exceptions to these general rules and that is what objective breeding is about. So to cover these losses of surplus sheep sales and meat sales the wool returns have to be much higher.

Where do I think we go from here, well I might just stick with the AMS sheep. From my musings I realise they are truly dual purpose sheep. A balance of meat, wool, surplus sheep and hardiness, a very diversified animal with several income streams. I'm HOME!!!

What a package! We just have to use the genetics better and work out systems beyond the farm gate as well. Yes there will be more effort involved but lets get more value from what we've got. See you at the AGM.

Letters to the Editor

Choosing a Production Based Sheep Selection Index – *Frank Legge*

We all know and accept that the aim of the AMS is to breed the most profitable sheep. This seems a simple enough proposition: one studies the market, determines the relative economic importance of each trait, then ranks the sheep according to a formula which weights each trait in proportion to its economic value. It is obvious that this will rank the sheep in the order of the value of their product.

On reflection however one realizes that for these sheep to be ranked in the correct order an assumption has been made, namely that market values will still be the same at the time their produce is sold. We would like to know the values at the time the product is to be sold, but that information of course cannot be obtained.

It is therefore necessary to give some thought to the way the market behaves so that we can deal with this problem in the most rational way. If we look at each of the traits of interest we see that most often there is a minor change from year to year, usually a general trend, sometimes a small reversal. We also note that occasionally there is a dramatic shift in an important trait. Who would have thought that meat prices would go so high? Who would have thought that wool prices could go so low and stay low for so long? Not one but two unexpected events have had a severe impact on the type of sheep that is most profitable, so it is clear that we cannot predict the future with any certainty.

As we cannot predict the future what practice should we adopt? It is my view that we should simply select sheep every year which will perform best in the current economic environment. This will certainly maximize short term income. If we decide instead to make a prediction that the future values will change in a particular way, and select our sheep accordingly, our short term income will obviously be reduced and our long term income will become dependent on the accuracy of our prediction. In my view the probability that the prediction will prove to be accurate is small hence long term income will probably also be reduced. Furthermore income earned early is worth more than the same amount earned later, due to the effect of interest. Also, if cash happens to be short, early income may have far more benefit than the interest saved.

To avoid loss of short term income I strongly urge members to avoid using a selection index which embodies particular trait goals. My reason for saying this is that assumptions about the future market are implicit in such goals. It is far safer to be guided by the current market. If this is done the changes from year to year will usually be small and hence the breeding direction will be reasonably consistent. On rare but significant occasions we will observe and respond promptly to substantial changes in the market.

I urge members to continue to use the AMS index as its accuracy as a mathematical model of a sheep's current economic value is unsurpassed. It is also a particularly appropriate index to use with a cooperative group, such as

the AMS, as it is easy to see and debate the economic weightings and thus maintain the confidence of members, vital to the long term viability of the society. We look forward to using it with breeding values of increasing accuracy as more progeny trial and pedigree information becomes available.

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The Sheep's Back - A New Era In Profitable Sheep Production – Ed Riggall

An exciting opportunity exists for W.A. Farmers to participate in a ground-breaking program designed to inject productivity, improvements and profitability into the sheep and wool enterprise of their operation.

ICON AGRICULTURE (a consortium of WA's leading sheep and wool consulting specialists) in partnership with Australian Wool Innovation, have embarked on a new process of sheep and wool extension delivery. The program is principally about implementing productivity enhancement in the livestock enterprise.

This program seeks to address these issues by addressing both the motivational and the technical requirements of the change process itself, whilst allowing business managers to dictate the direction of the change.

The program will consist of a 3-part process.

Part 1 is a pre defined 4-module course over a one and a half day period. This section defines the motivation for change, and quantifies the magnitude of change.

Part 2 deals with one module, that of benchmarking. In this module we do more than just give out a set of figures, we give analysis and skills to use benchmarking as an effective management tool.

Part 3 is largely self directed. Using the outcomes of the benchmarking module and general discussion, the group will have access to a range of various modules of which they can choose four in which to participate over the remaining 1.5 years of the course.

As a group you will have the support of a facilitator as well as a mentor/consultant to help guide the group and give local content.

The Pilot Program

The existence of this program is the result of the success of the pilot program we ran late last year. The pilot comprised six groups from a variety of sheep growing areas across the state. The response from our pilot groups was as follows:-

- All 82 members thought the course was a good use of their time.
- 82% committed (signed commitment form) to increasing their stocking rate.

Following are comments from a member. *"We hardly ever get to hear the views of expert sheep consultants and they were really able to show how other people are actually making money out of sheep and doing really well- it changes your attitude to the sheep business"* Bernie Driscoll, East Ballidu

COURSE COST - The cost to participating farmers will be \$950, however we have attained Farm Bis accreditation, which means a 50% discount to the grower, thus the actual cost is \$475. If a second person from the operation attends then they shall receive a further 50% discount. For further information on this programme please contact the Project Coordinator, *Ed Riggall on 9736 1583.*

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5th Merinotech Biennial Forum – Janet Evans

Merinotech (WA) is holding their 5th Biennial forum on Wednesday 3rd August. The title of the Forum is 'Best Practice Sheep Breeding' and will be composed of two sessions: 'Breeding the Profitable Sheep' and 'Advances in Sheep Breeding'.

In addition to the forum, Merinotech (WA) is holding a Master Class for ram breeders on Thursday 4th August. As the speakers from the forum are all experts in fields such as genetics, breeding and flock management, we have been presented with the perfect opportunity to get together and discuss the finer points of breeding whilst these leading researchers are in Kojonup. It is hoped that this day will generate open discussion and as the numbers will be limited everyone will have the opportunity to ask their questions and put forward their points of view.

The Master Class will run from 8.30am – 2.30pm and will consist of three sessions: Data Management – lead by Rob Banks and Sam Gill of MLA, Flock Structure – lead by Julius van der Werf of UNE and Fitness for use – lead by Rolf Beilharz. An independent chairperson will ensure that the discussion flows and that everyone will have opportunity to ask questions.

Cost:

Best Practice Sheep Breeding 3rd August 2005 - \$88 Forum and Masterclass 3rd & 4th August 2005 \$220.

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact Janet Evans, Forum Co-ordinator 08 -9833-7528

Bare Bum Sheep

Some members have raised the issue of how AMS might be proactive in the development of alternatives to mulesing. One such suggestion is that AMS should consider congregating a line of sheep that show traits likely to negate the need for mulesing and evaluate the options that such a flock may provide.

Rob Beard has expressed interest in pursuing this initiative and has offered to run the developing flock on his properties at North Meckering.

Executive urges all members to identify any lambs, hoggets, ewes and rams that exhibit traits that are likely to minimise the need for mulesing and contact Rob to discuss further.

Rob's contact numbers are - Phone: 08 9636 2064 Mobile: 0427 362 064

Current AMS Recommendations for Selection of Hoggets by Ram Breeders

The following traits should be objectively measured, following the removal of obvious visual culls, and the AMS Index used to rank the animals.

Wool weight

Suggest that at least 10 months wool growth be measured. Recommended that breeders use CLEAN FLEECE WEIGHT.

Average Fleece Yield

Recommended that all hoggets be assessed for yield. The AMS Index now includes yield as a trait in its own right. Recommended that mid side samples be used to determine average fleece yield (trials conducted by AMS and WADA at Alan and Joy Heitman's confirmed that pin bone site samples give very variable yield results and are therefore a poor predictor of average fleece yield).

Micron and CVD

If you are wishing to compare micron/CVD and not yield, then either the pin bone site or mid side site are quite acceptable.

Staple Strength

Recommended that all ram breeders adopt direct measurement of staple strength in their selection of hoggets. Previously most selection for staple strength in AMS flocks has been via indirect selection (i.e. selection for CVD). Typically flocks have SS ranges from 10 nkt to upto 80 nkt in the same mobs. Members need to ensure that the test house that you are utilising is able to provide staple strength and length measurements. The AMS Index now has the capacity to include staple strength as a trait for selection.

Body weights

Bodyweight measurements as close as possible to 14 months age are desirable. There is mounting evidence that members should also be recording condition score as well as body weights so that one can compare animals of the same bodyweight and condition score.

Testicle size

Measurement of testicular mass is also desirable (suggested that members use either the "worry beads" or a tape measure to establish relative testicle sizes). Larger testicle mass is directly correlated with improving flock fertility. Testicles need to be of correct consistency (firm, not soft and spongy) and free from abnormalities.

Update on the WA Footrot Eradication Program — Dr Tony Higgs WADA, Albany

The number of properties quarantined for Virulent Footrot in WA has fallen significantly. As at today (30 June 2005) there are 49 property quarantines (44 businesses) with 133,000 sheep, compared to 77 quarantines at 30 June 2004 (169,000 sheep) and 91 quarantines at 30 June 2003 (191,000 sheep). The decline in the number of quarantines can be attributed to an increased effort on infected properties but probably of more significance was a higher level of surveillance in 2003/4.

Surveillance at abattoirs has again proven to be a highly efficient and effective means of detecting Virulent Footrot. This is the seventh consecutive year where abattoir surveillance has been used with more lines of sheep inspected this year than in any other year. A total of 2,932 lines were inspected in 2004/5 with only 4 new Virulent Footrot cases (0.14%) being found. In 1998/9 there were 30 new cases identified from 660 lines (4.5%). The reduction in the percentage of new cases being identified through the abattoir is another encouraging measure of progress with eradication.

Another tool that is now being used to assist with the eradication effort is DNA fingerprinting of the bacteria that cause the disease. Knowing the DNA fingerprint of the bacteria assists with tracing the spread of the disease from

farm to farm. Being able to explain the way the disease has spread helps ensure that each outbreak is contained. DNA fingerprinting can also be used as another tool to measure progress with eradication by monitoring changes in the number of different types of bacteria remaining in WA. However, we do not as yet have sufficient data to assess progress by this means.

Plans for 2005/6

As with the previous two years, there will be a strong emphasis on surveillance to detect any cases of Virulent Footrot that have not yet been identified. Surveillance will be conducted through abattoirs and by on-farm inspections. The wet season so far this year is likely to increase the clinical expression of Virulent Footrot and, as a result, increase the chance of detection of the disease – a positive for the program.

Update on the OJD Management Program in WA – *Dr Fiona Sunderman WADA, Sth Perth*

In November 2003, Ovine Johne's disease (OJD) was detected in Western Australia (WA) through random abattoir surveillance. Risk assessments were done on several hundred tracings going back 10 years and over 80 higher risk properties were tested. This tracing and testing program was particularly thorough as Western Australia has the ability to trace sheep through saleyards. There are now 18 known OJD infected properties in 11 shires in WA. OJD is considered endemic on 7 properties (6 of them neighbours) and was detected, only in purchased sheep on 11 trace forward properties. None of the 18 flocks is known to be the source of infection in WA.

Clinical evidence of OJD has only been reported in flocks on two of the known infected properties (insert picture). Many of the infected trace forward properties have destocked the infected mobs and others have commenced using vaccine.

No positive lines have been detected in over 1,400 lines of mature sheep inspected at abattoirs in WA since January 2004. In addition, approximately 35,000 sheep have been inspected for OJD at abattoirs in the eastern states with no positive detections.

The Department of Agriculture and industry have carried out an extensive communications program. It included the development and distribution of a series of five fact sheets on OJD, a copy of the OJD AHS and a brochure on how to fill out the AHS, the delivery of numerous presentations and the provision of displays. It also included providing information to farmers on the options for increasing the number of OJD risk points of their flock in order to facilitate interstate movements.

The WA Program

The WA OJD Program to implement the National Approach to the Management of OJD was developed by the OJD Advisory Committee (OJDAC), an industry based committee. The OJDAC identified that the situation in WA was not the same as that in other states and that WA needed a program that took into account the disease situation in this State as well as the experience of the eradication and control measures in other states.

The OJDAC took into account that the basis of the new national approach was to transfer responsibility for the management of OJD to the farm gate, and move away from regulatory control programs. The Committee noted that through the availability of the Market Assurance Program, Animal Health Statements (AHS), abattoir surveillance, and free access to vaccine, owners had the tools to be able to best manage their businesses to deal with their biosecurity risks, and the disease if their flock was or became infected.

The OJDAC was sensitive to the enormous personal and social trauma and cost that had resulted from regulatory control measures in Australia. The Committee also took into account the results from a number of epidemiological models of the disease in Western Australia and a benefit cost analysis of control and eradication options.

The OJDAC agreed on a non regulatory, risk based trading and management option that harmonises with the national framework and enables individual farm businesses to make risk based business decisions for their own businesses and flocks.

OJD remains a notifiable disease but known infected properties are not placed under trading or movement restrictions. Tracing sheep movements from known infected properties and associated notification of subsequent owners is the responsibility of the owner of an infected property.

Abattoir surveillance is conducted on 1,000 lines of sheep over 2 years of age each year to underpin area prevalence classification and owners are notified in writing if OJD is detected. Individual flock abattoir inspection for Abattoir 200 and 700 status is available by arrangement on a fee for service basis.

Initially an OJD AHS was available for use by owners as part of their biosecurity measures. However, a more generic AHS that includes details on other animal health issues such as lice, internal parasites and footrot, has now been developed.

SheepMAP vets have been accredited to assist producers and OJD vaccine is available to producers through private veterinarians.



The cull for age ewe flock detected with OJD at the abattoir.

Check AMS website www.ausmerino.com.au for links to the WA Animal Health Statement under 'Livestock'.

Future Outlook for Fine Wool – *Chris Richardson*

The following article draws on information contained in the presentation at the 2005 Sheep Updates by Chris Wilcox, Chief Economist, The Woolmark Company.

During the period 1992/93 to 2005/06 the production of fine wool ($\leq 19\mu$) has increased by 130% whilst the production of medium wool (20-25 μ) has reduced by 60%.

Trends for Australian Merino Wool

1999/2000	Fine Wool $\leq 19\mu$	2004/2005
91M kg (15% of clip)	Australian Production	156M kg (33% of clip)
110M kg	Export Volume	164M kg
AUD \$734M	Export Value	AUD \$1008M
1999/2000	Medium Wool 20-23 μ	2004/2005
405M kg (65% of clip)	Australian Production	259M kg (54% of clip)
514M kg	Export Volume	265M kg
AUD \$1856M	Export Value	AUD \$1317M

The key drivers for fine wool demand are:

- economic and income growth
- prices for other luxury fibres
- fabric design and fashion trends
- consumer preferences.

Consumer preferences favour increased demand for fine wool because of the preference of consumers for products that are comfortable (fineness and softness), lightweight, and luxurious at affordable prices when compared to other luxury fibres.

The key markets for $\leq 19\mu$ are:

- Menswear (55%) suits, jackets and trousers
- Womenswear (20%) suits, skirts and blouses
- Knitwear (20%) fine worsteds and cashmere blends, underwear.

Price Trends for Australian Merino Wool

1999/2000 AUD c/kg	Average Prices	2004/2005 AUD c/kg
2933	16 μ and finer	1221
1764	17 μ	975
1117	18 μ	876
851	19 μ	806
597	20 μ	741
475	21 μ	711
432	22 μ	696
408	23 μ	664

'Finewool is the dominant luxury fibre in the lightweight knitwear and tailored formalwear garments'.

Chris Wilcox suggests that during the 2nd half of 2005 there will be a softening of the wool market due to factors including high oil prices, rising interest rates, low cotton prices and the strong A\$.

However he contends that the outlook for 2006 and beyond is strong – especially for fine wool with a high likelihood that wool prices will rise above levels seen in the 1990's (but price cycles will remain) and that premiums for fine wool will increase towards long term levels.

The changed market conditions for merino wool (and merino sheepmeat) were also highlighted by other presenters at the 2005 Sheep Updates. Economic analysis suggests that over the past 10 years the relative economic importance of wool/meat has changed from 70:30 10 years ago to 40:60 today for merino flocks.

The official average lambing % for WA is 75% currently, hence most WA sheep producers will be able to significantly increase nett returns by increasing weaning % to in excess of 100%.

The message I took home from the 2005 Sheep Updates was that an AMS merino flock weaning 110% lambs with a wool clip of $\leq 19\mu$ and supplying surplus lambs to a market that pays prime lamb schedule prices (as some members are currently achieving) will be a very profitable enterprise when compared to other sheep enterprise options.

How well are you placed?

Fibresoft

"Fibresoft" is a computer software program that has been developed by AFT Queensland for use by sheep managers in the office, sheep yards and shearing shed. It has a number of capacities including ranking animals by indexes of your selection.

AMS Executive and Breeding Policy Committee member Frank Legge (on behalf of AMS) has been working with the programmer (Gavin Lawson) who has been developing this software package to ensure that the software from a index selection perspective meets the current and future needs of AMS members, as well as ensuring that the program is accredited to AMS standards for accuracy of sheep selection based on the AMS index options that are currently available to breeders.

Frank's report on progress to date follows:

All the major issues with this program appear to have been satisfactorily addressed in the latest version. It now produces three reports which are well set out. There is the main report, the rejects report and the group summary. The latter is for purposes such as ranking sires in progeny trials. The cover page includes all the settings used in the score calculation for easy reference.

Setting up the program is particularly easy with numerous defaults which can be set in the manner most likely to be used. Two default indexes are provided, one for the "official" index and one for the user's preferred index. Adjusting the index defaults is through a straightforward menu system. Gavin is to be congratulated for the very clear presentation of steps to be taken in setting up a particular run with all stages accessed through tabs on a single screen page. This makes it particularly easy to perform "what if" experiments in which the default index is modified to observe the effect. The default index can be restored after the experiments with a single click. It also reappears if the program is closed and reopened, thus obviating the risk of inadvertently starting a new job with a modified index.

Bringing data in from an Excel spreadsheet, through a csv file, is flexible, with no requirement for the data columns to be in a particular order, and no requirement that the data start at a particular row. It correctly identifies the traits if the common abbreviations like GFW are used in the heading. If some data, for example bodyweight, is not available initially it is possible to bring in another file later to update the original.

In short the program is accurate and a pleasure to use. It appears to be ready for distribution.

Accredited Test Houses

The following are the only test houses currently with AMS accreditation in Australia:

- AFT York (Hewett's)
- Genestock, Kojonup

Annual General Meeting and Conference – Friday 12th August 2005

Friday 12th August 2005 – AGM, Seminar and Sundowner
Theatre, Perth Zoo, South Perth, \$100.00 / person incl. GST

Partners wishing to attend the Sundowner only, the cost will be: \$ 20/head. Please notify the office and/or add this to your registration form to confirm your intent to attend.

Please return your registration forms now!

Accommodation is available at Metro Inn, Arlington Quest Apartments, Peninsula Apartments, and Broadwater all at reasonable rates and based in South Perth. Most are within walking distance to the Zoo. Parking on the west side of the zoo is free of charge. However, parking at the north end of the zoo near the South Perth Bowling Club is on a fee basis. You may like to check out www.ratestogo.com.au or www.wotif.com.au. These are websites with special accommodation rates and have super special rates up to 20 days prior to the accommodation required.

Making more from Merino sheep meats

1.25pm	Welcome <i>Ashley Hobbs</i>	AMS President
1.30pm to 2.15pm	The genetic potential of merinos to produce quality sheep meats <i>Dr Johan Greeff</i>	DAWA Geneticist Katanning, WA
2.15pm to 3.00pm	Merino sheep meats – how to ensure quality cuts? <i>David Pethick</i>	Associate Professor of Biochemistry Murdoch University, WA
3.00 to 3.30pm	Afternoon Tea	
3.30pm to 4.15pm	Merino sheep meats – how to maximise returns? <i>Peter Trefort</i>	Farmer, Processor and MLA Director Narrogin, WA
4.15pm to 4.45pm	Panel Session	
4.45pm	Closing Comments <i>Ashley Hobbs</i>	AMS President
5.00pm to 6.00pm	Sundowner at the Perth Zoo	

Website www.ausmerino.com.au

Place your livestock for sale/wanted on the AMS website. The detail headings below show the information that is required.

Tag Colour	Number	Date Available	Date of Shearing	Animal Health Statement	Price	Info
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'Info' section allows you to add any other information e.g. drench status, treatments etc. We have a category for Ewes, Rams and Wethers, and also a category for Merino and Other Breeds. Surplus AMS ewe hoggets are keenly sought after by the prime lamb industry as they make ideal dams.

Some RBC's have linked their own page. We encourage all RBC's to be proactive and host a page. This website is experiencing substantial traffic.

Fax/email the office with your details now!