

Making More From Sheep



Australian Wool
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'It's ewe time!' on the Monaro

Keeping a close eye on the fundamentals of Merino wool production continues to pay dividends for Bombala graziers, the Hood family.

As a committed grazing enterprise, 8,000 Merino ewes and 450 Angus-Hereford cross breeders and all their followers are run under the family owned Tintagel Pastoral Company on 3,000 hectares south of Bombala.

For Charles Hood, who with brother-in-law Craig Mitchell co-manage the farms, the key to driving profitability is about: "doing the basics right - 100% of the time, to provide the platform for a productive farm and successful business."



"Our approach is to use trait leading genetics matched to the proven nutrition and husbandry practises for the district.

"The top 900 ewes are run as a separate nucleus flock to breed replacement rams for the operation.

"After an intensive visual assessment and objective measurement selection process, up to 100 rams are kept each year, with the top 4-6 being re-mated in the nucleus to gather progeny information. From this progeny information, ram breeding sires are selected.

"The rams are assessed as yearlings for visual aspects like conformation, fleece-rot and wool quality and body weights are recorded, and they are shorn twice – at 10 months and again at 16 months of age - to gather data on the key wool traits of fibre diameter and fleece weight," he says.

Outside bloodlines are selected as required via MERINOSELECT, where trait leading genetics for certain attributes are used; these are introduced into the nucleus flock via AI.

Charles says micron and fleece weight traits are the fundamental genetic factors for any wool producer.

"We're cutting an average of 6.2 kg's of 19 micron wool from across the whole flock. This is down from the 20.5-21 micron range of a decade ago, yet we've maintained wool cuts and body weights.

"We take notice of the other wool quality traits, but don't get too caught up in them; keeping the operation simple-to-manage is a priority, and we find that those other desirable traits tend to come anyway with the focus on micron and wool cut."

Ease-of-management will be one of many key topics to be explored at the upcoming Making More from Sheep 'It's ewe time!' forum in Cooma on July 28;

Monaro producers are encouraged to attend to hear from a range of specialist speakers about how to:

- cut 10 per cent more wool,
- wean 10 per cent more lamb per hectare, and
- increase carcase weights by 10 per cent.

Charles uses the MERINOSELECT 14% index to achieve the breeding objective, which is a simple yet proven one: maintain fleece and body weights while reducing micron. Recently, the Hoods have added staple strength to the index to increase genetic staple strength over time.

"The objective is reviewed each year to take account of market signals, though we're happy with the progress we've made and what the flock is producing, year-in and year-out," says Charles.

Regarding carcase and ease-of-management traits, Charles says these characteristics are being inherently delivered by using index leaders, as they tend to be bigger, better-doing and plainer-bodied sheep.

Of the Merino ewes, some 3,000 of the 4 and 5 year olds are mated to Border-Leicester rams, and the first-cross ewe and wether portion progeny are sold to specialist prime lamb producers and fatteners respectively at district summer circuit sales and through Auctionsplus.

"We're regularly achieving about 90% weaning rates from the mature ewes – it was even 100%+ last year – by focusing on ensuring the ewes are at optimal condition scores at key points of the year, which comes from good nutrition and parasite management.

"My simple rule-of-thumb is that they need to be at CS 3–3.5 coming into joining and lambing, at CS 2.5–3 after weaning which is consistent with principles from Lifetime Ewe Management.

"To achieve this, we operate a basic rotational grazing system that provides an absolute minimum of 700kg/ha of dry matter, and red wheat grain is fed as a supplement if required."

Some 50 to 100 hectares of is set aside each year to grow dual-purpose red wheat crops for grazing and grain. With the droughts experienced in the last 15 years, most Monaro farms are now set-up to feed stock with silos, augers and feedcarts. Also, with the increased value of livestock, decisions on feeding are made more easily allowing optimal condition scores to be maintained.

Charles says the next focus will be to start looking at management methods that can push overall reproductive performance up over 100% consistently.

Pastures on the Tintagel run country are typical for the Bombala area – they're based on phalaris, cocksfoot, fescue, ryegrass and white and sub-clovers; they're fertilised according to regular soil testing in October and where available P falls below about 25 Cowells units, fertiliser is applied at appropriate rates during January - February.

Equally, there are no 'bells and whistles' when it comes to effective worm control; Charles and family use faecal worm egg counting to monitor worm burdens and drench resistance testing so only effective drenches are used.

"We know that the old 'white's and clears' no longer deliver a drench effectiveness of more than 95%, so those drench types are only ever used as a combination drench formulation in a planned rotation schedule."

The Tintagel P/C stocking rate averages out at an average of 9-10 DSE/ha in a 650mm average annual rainfall district.

"We know we are among the heavier stockers on the Monaro, and the fact that we haven't had any serious worm issues or drench breakdowns indicates that our strategy is working.

"The work being done by seedstock breeders on finding rams with natural resistance to internal parasites is, however, really important and we will definitely be looking to utilise this information in the future.

"We carefully consider new techniques and making major changes in management or breeding directions – farming is all about finding the balance between optimal outputs and costs of production."

"We know our true cost of production - for the wool enterprise it is nearly \$7/kg clean. We also have done benchmarking comparisons with other properties, and this has shown Tintagel Pastoral Co is working quite well as a business.

"I'd encourage producers to consider attending the Cooma 'It's ewe time' forum this year – it's one of very few opportunities to hear first-hand the latest information on cost efficient, easy-to-manage wool and lamb production," Charles says.



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