



Sheep CRC Practical Wisdom Notes

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Getting the most from each ewe

By Mandy Curnow, DAFWA

Key points

- Optimising ewe management can lead to significant improvements in farm profitability.
- The Lifetime Ewe Management program has successfully trained over 1500 producers in simple and effective ewe management skills and principles, and training is still available.

Introduction

Many of the costs associated with breeding lambs and producing wool from each sheep are on a per animal basis, such as the cost of treatments, the number of rams required and shearing. For similar inputs, it makes sense to keep the animals with the better long-term outputs.

These outputs are heavily based on genetics and the nutrition of the actual animal, but another key factor in the lifetime performance of a sheep is the treatment it receives while it is still inside its mother. On a flock basis, the overall treatment of breeding ewes also has a large impact on profitability.

Lifetime Wool, a research and extension program, identified aspects of management and nutrition that affected the lifetime performance of Merinos. The results of this project were further developed and have been delivered to producers across southern Australia under the Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) program.

LTEM training uses group learning where a group of 5 local farmers meet 6 times over a year, visiting each farm each time, to learn and implement new skills and to share their knowledge and experience.

What are the benefits from applying Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) principles?

On average, across the farms that participated in LTEM, a 15% increase in lamb marking rates was achieved.

An independent financial analysis of LTEM found the benefits arose from 2 avenues (source: John Young, Farming Systems Analysis, Western Australia):

- increases in efficiency due to improved understanding of the pasture animal system;
- adoption of targets for the condition score profile of the ewe flock over the reproduction cycle.

The first avenue for achieving benefits, through increasing efficiency, was primarily from improving pasture utilisation and stocking rate. The changes producers made to their systems resulted from:

- the knowledge gained about animal requirements and pasture growth;
- the monitoring of feed-on-offer and animal performance on their farm;
- discussion with other producers on how to implement this in their farm system.

The other avenue for achieving benefits related to having the correct targets for reproducing ewes at key times. This could increase profit even for producers who were operating at optimal stocking rates. The benefit of managing ewes to the optimum condition score profile was up to \$5–7/ewe for Merino enterprises and \$10–12/ewe for prime lamb enterprises.

Changing the condition score profile of the ewes affected profit through its impact on flock productivity and through the cost of providing feed. Improving the ewes' condition score profile resulted in:

- decreased ewe mortality;
- increased lamb birth weights and hence lamb survival;
- the progeny cutting more wool that is finer.

What is learned during LTEM training?

The LTEM program is designed to improve your decision making in relation to ewe nutrition and ewe management. Skills are gained in the condition scoring of sheep, the assessment of pastures, stubbles and feed budgeting. Implementation will improve the performance of your ewe flock—the engine room of your sheep business—thus increasing overall profitability. at least two sires are nominated.

What are the key principles of LTEM?

Producers in the medium to higher rainfall zones of temperate Australia can optimise the performance of their ewes through the following:

- Maintain ewes in body condition score 3 where possible, but especially at joining and lambing;
- Condition score a sample of ewes (about 50) each time the sheep are being handled (or each 1–2 months) to monitor changes in their condition;
- Assess paddock feed when the ewes are assessed and match this to the needs of the ewes;
- Provide supplementation to maintain body condition, as it is more cost-effective than feeding to put on weight;
- Pregnancy scan ewes at 70 days after the start of joining to identify litter size, then manage the nutrition of these ewe groups accordingly;
- Provide lambing paddocks with high quality feed; shelter from cold, wind and rain; areas of privacy for the birth; and implement a program to prevent predation by foxes, pigs and wild dogs.



Figure 1. Demonstrating condition scoring to a group of sheep producers at Serpentine, Victoria.

How successful is the program?

More than 1500 producers managing more than 6 million breeding ewes or 15% of the National ewe flock enrolled in the LTEM training program between 2006/07 and 2012/13.

It is estimated that the combined increase in stocking rate and lamb marking percentage that has resulted from participation in LTEM has increased the number of lambs marked per hectare by more than 25% (2.7 vs. 3.5 lambs/ha). These productivity gains achieved by participants of LTEM can be attributed directly to changes in their use of management practices including managing pastures, managing ewes and their nutrition, and measuring performance.

Independent evaluations have found:

- an overall satisfaction rating of 8.6 out of 10 (ranging from 7 to 10);
- 91% of participating producers have recommended LTEM to other producers.

How can you participate?

The program is run over 6 sessions per year for a year and is delivered to small groups of 5 to maximize learning and interaction between producers. All sessions are conducted on the participants' farms, using their sheep and delivered by leading industry experts. A 'hands-on' approach with a focus on condition scoring, pasture assessment and feed budgeting ensures that the outcomes are practical and applicable to your business.

Ideally, the 5 properties in each group are spread by a total traveling distance of less than 100 km to easily allow completion of all LTEM activities each session. Also, lambing dates should differ by no more than 2 months, so that activities are relevant for the stage in the reproduction cycle.

Fees are charged for participation in the program. Contact RIST for the current fees.

Take home message

Many producers have gained the skills that allowed them to make significant improvements to their flock's lifetime performance and profitability—you can too—contact RIST to enrol in an LTEM group.

More information

<http://www.rist.com.au/lifetime-ewe-management.php>

Acknowledgements

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