THE WOOLGROWERS' GUIDE TO QUEENSLAND MERINO STUDS

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SUMMARY
The Woolgrowers’ Guide to Queensland Merino Studs is a co-operative project of the Queensland Merino Stud Sheepbreeders’ Association (QMSSA) and the Merino Genetic Improvement Group (MGIG) of the Department of Primary Industries, Queensland (DPIQ). It is a service to woolgrowers who are seeking information on Queensland studs, their breeding objectives, programs, production records and the availability of sale rams. It was launched at the St George Ram Sales in December 1995 by the President of the QMSSA. The information is supplied by the studs and the database is maintained by the MGIG. The data will be updated annually before the ram selling season. The Guide is an Access database available through the DPIQ network, at all DPIQ Information Centres and through MGIG members. It will also be available on the Internet so producers, agents and others can access the Guide from their own computers and download whatever they need. A similar service to provide details on interstate studs is being investigated.

Keywords: Queensland, Australian Merino, databases, computers, rams.

INTRODUCTION
The Woolgrowers’ Guide to Queensland Merino Studs is a collaborative project of the Queensland Merino Stud Sheepbreeders’ Association (QMSSA) and the Merino Genetic Improvement Group (MGIG) of the Department of Primary Industries, Queensland (DPIQ). The Guide was launched by the QMSSA President in December 1995 at the St George Ram Sales. It is an example of using new technology to tackle an old problem - that is, supplying up-to-date information.

THE PROBLEM
Rams contribute 70-80% of the genetic improvement in a flock. Most commercial woolgrowers breed their own ewe replacements but purchase rams or semen from studs. The structure of the Merino industry is thus a hierarchy with genetic material (mostly rams or semen) moving down the structure. Studs determine the rate and direction of genetic improvement in commercial flocks, so choosing a stud is one of the most important decisions a commercial sheep breeder will make.

Woolgrowers need to choose a stud with compatible breeding objectives so they know they are going in the preferred direction; to choose a stud with sheep of high genetic merit so they start from as far ahead as possible and to choose a stud which is making maximum genetic progress so they get the genetic improvement as quickly as possible. Besides genetic information woolgrowers need to know other practical things about the stud such as its location and management program.
When choosing a stud, woolgrowers need to know its location, breeding objectives, management practices, bloodlines and from a genetic viewpoint how the stud compares with other studs (its relative genetic merit) and if it is making genetic progress.

To make an informed decision when buying rams woolgrowers need information on numbers available, grade and price, time of shearing and months of wool growth on sale rams, and the availability of production records. The services the stud has available to clients, the relative genetic merit of individual rams both within the stud and compared with rams from other studs will also impact on choice.

At present there is little detailed information on studs, their breeding programs, the relative genetic merit of studs or rams, or the genetic progress achieved in studs. Woolgrowers get such information from many sources, some of which may be more reliable than others. People from whom advice is sought include other woolgrowers, studbreeders, sheep classifiers, wool classifiers, agents, and DPIQ officers. Other sources of information include wether trails, sire reference schemes, shows, brochures for on-property sales and public auctions. However there is no reference publication where most of the information sought about studs is available.

THE SOLUTION
Queensland studbreeders saw a need for an information guide about Queensland studs and sought the assistance of the MGIG. It was agreed that a database would be set up and maintained by the MGIG and studbreeders would provide the data. A computer database was chosen as it would be very cost-effective, easy to access, easy to update and would be a flexible format for any additions or changes in requirements. It also meant that anyone seeking only selected pieces of information would not need to obtain 90 pages of printed matter.

COLLECTION OF THE DATA
Studs decide whether they wish to provide information to the Guide and what information they do provide. All data is supplied by the stud and is entered into the database unedited. While the Guide is organised under headings, it is in free format so the stud may provide as little or as much information as they choose and presented in whatever format they choose. The data is obtained by questionnaire and will be updated annually at the beginning of the ram-selling season. Studs may however request any changes to their listing as they are required.

THE DATA
Stud details. The front page for each stud contains information on the name of the stud and whether it is horned or polled; the property name and address and the facsimile and telephone numbers. It also provides the district and region where the stud is located and directions on how to get to the property from the nearest town. Details of the land type are also given so the client knows what sort of country the stud is run on. Names of the owner, manager, classifier and stud representatives are given.
Breeding program and livestock details. The breeding objectives of the stud are detailed in a separate section. Under the livestock details are listed the bloodlines and the breeding of current sires. Wool type is given as the average fibre diameter of the ewe fleece lines and the size of the stud by number of stud ewes. Fleece measurements used for selection of sires is listed where appropriate.

Information on sale rams. This includes: Date rams are available from, month of drop of rams, ram wool growth at sale date, details of fleece measurements available on sale rams. There is a listing of grade, price and number of sale rams available and as well studs may provide any other information about the sale rams under sale ram notes.

Studbreeders are given three other headings to advertise their studs' performance - stud features, stud achievements and other comments. Successes in shows as well as the success of their clients in wether competitions, wool and sheep sales are often featured.

No suggestions or instructions are given to studs about the type of information they provide so the Guide should provide an outlet for the stud to promote their stud and advertise their sheep in whatever way they choose.

THE DATABASE
The database is available on the DPIQ network and can be accessed through any Sheep and Wool officer or Information Centre. The Guide is written in Microsoft Access and has an attractive, easy-to-use format which is accessed by clicking on labelled buttons. Clients can browse through the whole database or select studs by choosing the type of stud (horned or polled) and then searching by stud name; district or region; name of studbreeder, classer or representative; or by keyword. Selected information or the whole database may be printed if the client wants to take a hard copy away for further study.

THE PRINTED GUIDE
If the client cannot access the database directly, information can be printed and sent on request by any Sheep and Wool officer or Information Centre. A glossy cover has been designed to bind printed sheets as it was felt that this would make the Guide an identifiable product and would be a good advertisement to catch the eye of other potential clients and get the Guide known. At the front of the printout there is information about the Guide; a short extension article which can be updated (the first one was entitled - Choosing a study); and a list of names, addresses and telephone and facsimile numbers for the QMSSA secretary and members of the MGIG.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS
Internet access. As people other than woolgrowers may find this Guide of interest, access via the Internet would increase the potential client list considerably. Agents, consultants and other commercial bodies already have computer access to the Internet. As communications to remote areas improve, an increasing number of woolgrowers can gain access to such information.
directly from their property. Computers will play a greater role in data gathering and all areas of buying and selling.

**National Guide.** As many commercial woolgrowers buy rams from interstate, particularly New South Wales and South Australian studs, it is hoped that in future a similar guide may be compiled for interstate studs. This could lead to a National Guide for Australian Merino Studs.

**Genetic information on studs and rams.** There has been a growing demand by commercial woolgrowers for information on the genetic merit of sale rams. The increasing use of objective measurement and recording schemes like Rampower has enabled studs to provide well defined breeding objectives for the stud and production records which detail the within-stud genetic merit of individual rams.

With the advent of central test sire evaluation schemes which can be linked by sophisticated analyses, it is now possible to provide between-stud and between-year comparisons of superior sires whose financial value may be far greater and whose genetic influence may be more widespread. As well, analyses of wether trial data have provided valuable information on the performance of bloodlines. Consultancies are now able to provide studs with information on their potential and achieved genetic progress for the traits of value to commercial woolgrowers. An assessment of the efficiency of the stud's breeding program, information about superior rams generated from sire reference data and details of bloodline performance obtained from wether trials would all be valuable additions to future stud Guides for both clients and potential clients.

More than two thirds of Queensland studbreeders responded to the first questionnaire and attempts are being made to increase the number in the 1996/7 update by telephone and property visits. All studbreeders received a copy of the first edition of the Guide and it is hoped that by seeing the format of the Guide and the responses of other studs, more studbreeders will take the time to provide a listing in the Guide. It is obvious that a great deal of the information asked for would not need to be updated each ram selling season so the time needed to update will be very much less than that taken to fill in the first questionnaire.

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