Lamb producers have been actively encouraged to develop trading relationships with the wholesale and retail sectors in the last few years. A number of different approaches have been adopted, including the formation of cooperatives and marketing groups (Farrell and Tozer 1995). One marketing group in the Grenfell district of NSW developed a trading relationship with a Canberra based company in 1995. From this has come the brand ‘Pastoral Prime’. Performance of the brand in terms of throughput, carcass quality and meat quality, will be discussed here.

Set targets for throughput have seen the number of branded carcasses rise from 300 per week in 1996 to 500 per week in 1997. Another company has trialed the brand on 150 lambs per week in 1997. Further growth is anticipated, which is requiring the cooperation of other marketing groups in central and southern NSW which have complementary production cycles to guarantee continuity of supply.

Producers receive feedback on weight and fat levels for their lambs slaughtered in the alliance. To date over 70% of the lambs have complied to the set specification of 18-22 kg carcass weight and fatscore 2 or 3 (6-15mm on the GR scale). The major reason for non-compliance is incorrect fat levels. This information allows livestock assessors to make adjustments and improve their performance. A continuing aim is to consistently achieve over 90% compliance, which we know is realistic.

One aspect of the brand that makes it distinctive from all others is a meat sampling and testing regime to monitor quality of the product at the retail level. Meat pH, colour and tenderness measured objectively, are established for Pastoral Prime (PP) branded product and also for competitors’ product obtained from retail outlets in Canberra. To date loin muscle pH for the PP product has averaged 5.64, compared to 5.71 for ‘generic’ product which has exceeded a specified threshold of 5.80 in 19% of samples, but for the PP product only in 3% of the samples. This significant advantage (P < 0.05) has carried through to chromameter L* values (37.5 vs 36.5), with 16% of generic samples being darker than the threshold value of 34 compared to none of the PP samples. In both cases PP product has exhibited a lower coefficient of variation, a reflection it is suggested of a more direct method of procuring lambs and enhanced pre-slaughter handling. In terms of tenderness, PP product has had an average Warner-Bratzler shear force of 2.8 kg/cm² compared with 3.1 kg/cm² for generic product, there being no difference between these mean values, and overall a 98% compliance to a 5 kg/cm² threshold has been achieved. Above this threshold it is considered most Australian consumers would consider the meat to be unacceptably tough. This high level of compliance in part reflects the sampling regime, with samples being obtained early in the week and in many cases coming from lambs slaughtered the previous week. This has ensured an aged product is obtained, PP product having a mean age of 5.8 days, compared with ‘generic’ of 3.9 days. With a recommendation to participating retailers not to sell lamb within 3 days of slaughter, it is predicted that PP products will continue to achieve high compliance for tenderness. Further if sampling was conducted over a full week then ‘generic’ product would be ‘fresher’ and thus on average tougher, giving PP product an advantage.

Driven by customer demand, emphasis on product quality in the broadest sense is leading to much closer relationships between producers of stock and marketers of meat. New Zealand data for beef indicate that processors can increase compliance rates by identifying preferred suppliers (Wright et al. 1997), something that can only occur in direct trading relationships and where product quality is continually monitored. The Pastoral Prime alliance serves as an Australian example of a trading relationship that is delivering a more consistent product to consumers. Over the longer term the alliance will serve as a good model to evaluate the benefit of such trading systems in terms of profitability and consumer satisfaction.