

2000/V04



## Producer Research Support

### Improving Profitability from Irrigated Pasture

#### Loddon & Murray Prime Lamb Group



### The project

Lambs have traditionally been left on ewes until 16 weeks of age and suckers sold directly to a sale yard. The premise of this project was that lambs left on their dams for longer than 8-10 weeks causes an overburden of sheep on the available pasture and excessive irrigation costs.

This project proposed to wean lambs at 10 weeks, place their dams on dry country (not irrigated) and retain irrigated pasture for the lambs only, measuring the anticipated increase in profitability of this approach.

### Objectives

1. Maintain the the viability of prime lamb production off irrigated pastures in northern Victoria;
2. Demonstrate that average gross margin can be increased from \$100 to \$150 per ha of irrigated pasture;
3. Demonstrate that average gross margin can be increased from \$50 to \$75 per ML of water;
4. Increase lamb turn off per hectare from 100kgs dressed weight to 150kgs dressed weight in contrast to sucker lambs remaining with their mothers until sold at 4-6months of age; and
5. Improve productivity and profitability from prime lambs running on irrigated pasture.

### What was done

Six lamb producers in the Kerang area made their sheep available for the trial. In 2001 50 lambs were chosen from each property, 25 of which stayed on the ewes and 25 were weaned at 10 weeks (total 300 lambs).

In 2004 the same six producers increased the number of lambs to 80 each (464 in total), half of which were weaned and half which were left on the dams.

Pasture tests and worm tests were carried out in both years. All lambs were individually tagged and weighed twice each year. Various breeds were used, including Merino, Border Leicester Merino Cross, Poll Dorset and White Suffolk.

### What happened?

Growth rate of lambs in both years varied due to feed availability and breed of sheep.

In 2001 the lambs grew at 189grams per day (Merino dams) to 307 grams per day for the cross dams.

In 2004 the lambs grew at 216 grams per day (Merino dams) through to 384 grams per day for the cross dams.

The Loddon & Murray Prime Lamb Group demonstrated the success of weaning lambs at 8-10 weeks, growing them out and marketing them directly to processors. In contrast to the traditional system of producing sucker lambs, lamb turn-off per hectare or ML of irrigation water was increased and consequently overall profitability.

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## Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

Contact Gerald Martin -  
Producer Research Support Coordinator.

Tel 08 8556 2900 or  
producersupport@mla.com.au

## MLA also recommends

### EDGEnetwork

EDGEnetwork offers practical field-based workshops to improve productivity and profitability for the long-term.

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## Merino Dams

Lambs on the Merino dams grew better when weaned at 10 weeks than those left on the ewes. These lambs were then able to be placed on the best irrigation pasture and finished as suckers, with the ewes being placed on dry country. This also enabled the ewe to recover and be able to put on weight, thus enabling an early joining for the following season.

The Merino ewes had far less milk after 10 weeks with the lambs just following them around.

## Cross Bred Ewes

Lambs on the crossbred ewes left the farmer with two choices. The ewes were still milking at the end of 10 weeks, meaning the lambs could stay on the ewe and be sold as suckers (depending on water availability and cost), or be weaned and finished on irrigated pasture.

There was very little difference in the growth rate of weaned and unweaned lambs. Because this district traditionally sells in the sale yards, most lambs still remain on the ewes.

## Discussion

Unfortunately this project was conducted during a drought, with three of the lowest water allocation years for the district contributing to the fact that the trial did not run in consecutive years. The trial would have been pointless as the ewes were in poor condition and couldn't milk which resulted in the lambs being poor. Water costs increased from \$20/meg to \$50 per megalitre from 2001 to 2004, making this trial even more important.

For future similar trials, a larger number of lambs would be required to obtain a more balanced outcome. The second trial year using 464 lambs was far better than the first year with 300 lambs.

Group members learned that weaning lambs early (10-12 weeks) results in less stress on the irrigated pasture meaning they can now run more breeders. Weaning lambs earlier means the breeders don't require the best irrigated pasture because they only have to look after themselves. This meant that ewes were in better condition to conceive at the next matings as they recovered from lactation earlier.

Lambing percentage is important, as the more lambs weaned per ewe means more productivity per hectare from the farm. With lambs providing the income for the farmer it is vital that they receive the best irrigated pasture.

## Next steps

Of the six producers involved, the two with merino dams will now always wean early.

The four with the cross ewes have a choice now which will vary on the season, the cost of water and the number of ewes they would like to run per hectare. With irrigated pasture, a large lambing percentage (vital) followed by early weaning (drying ewes off early) would produce more kilograms of lamb per hectare at less cost per kilogram. This would make far better use of the main cost of production, being water.