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Producer Research Support

Victorian lamb producers explore production/marketing options in search for a better deal

Woolsthorpe and District Prime Lamb Group



The project

Participants in this Producer Research Support project to explore targeted lamb production are better positioned to more confidently supply different markets by changing their lamb production and marketing management.

First-hand experience of the production of cryptorchid lambs, including an appreciation of improved management techniques and the likely effect on growth rate and carcase characteristics, was learnt by members of the Woolsthorpe and District Prime Lamb Group.

Objectives

1. Demonstrate the most efficient and profitable methods for turning off lamb in the autumn-winter period; and
2. Give district lamb producers the skills and confidence to target the production and marketing of lamb at a specific market.

What was done

Key activities:

1. Two cryptorchid evaluation demonstrations;
2. Pasture assessment skills;
3. Live lamb assessment;
4. Meat processing tour;
5. Sire selection demonstration;
6. Finishing systems for carryover lambs; and
7. Marketing options: CALM, over-the-hooks, contract.

What happened?

Cryptorchid Evaluation

The two cryptorchid evaluation demonstrations were conducted over the 1994–95 summer/autumn period, in a difficult feed year (dry summer with failure of fodder crop establishment).

One of these trials was more successful than the other in demonstrating the benefits offered by cryptorchids.

However, at the field day held at the 'unsuccessful' demonstration site, results were presented from other trials, supporting the usual weight gain and leanness advantages attributed to cryptorchids.

The aim was to demonstrate differences in growth and carcase characteristics achievable with the use of cryptorchid lambs, and allow group members to experience aspects of cryptorchid management.

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Contact details

Martin Dunstan
78 Henna St
Warrnambool VIC 3280
Tel(03) 5561 9900



Key points

- Participants are better positioned to confidently supply different markets by implementing changes in their lamb production and marketing management.
- Producers have improved skills in the assessment of pastures for both quality and quantity, and a set of pasture quality quantity benchmarks for meeting various production targets.
- Improved skills in assessing lambs for management and marketing purposes.
- Improved understanding of processor requirements and a greater appreciation of how these are dictated by consumers.
- Experience in getting processor feedback.
- Participants obtained first-hand experience of the financial benefits to be gained with the use of proven superior sires, as tested under LAMBPLAN.
- Appreciation of different marketing options.

In the first demonstration measured cryptorchid lambs produced carcasses 0.2 kg heavier than wether lambs. They also had a GR fat 2mm greater than the wethers, opposite to the expected result. At this carcass weight, most cryptorchid lambs are leaner than wether lambs by around 1–3 mm.

In the second trial measured cryptorchid lambs on average produced carcasses 1.1 kg heavier, and 1 mm leaner than wether lambs.

During the last five week period, when the lambs were placed on good (quality and quantity) pasture, the cryptorchids grew at a rate of 285 g/day, compared with 229 g/day for the wethers.

Pasture and live lamb assessment skills

Pasture and live lamb assessment skills were developed through the group undertaking a PROGRAZE course.

Most meetings included practical assessment exercises on both pasture and lambs.

The relationships between pasture quality/quantity and animal performance were developed using Feedtest data for pastures, pasture mass assessment techniques, and use of the Grazfeed program within the course.

Carcass feedback information was used to provide objective feedback on live assessment when lambs processed from one of the cryptorchid demonstrations were shown to the group.

Group members who participated in the PROGRAZE course made significant ground in their ability and confidence in estimating pasture mass and quality.

At the conclusion of the course, 73% of participants described themselves as feeling confident about their ability to assess pastures.

None of the group members indicated this confidence at the start of the course.

Feedback regarding the livestock assessment skills was also positive in this regard.

Meat processing tour

The meat processing tour was arranged to coincide with the cryptorchid evaluation.

This tour took in the processing works of MC Herd Pty Ltd in Geelong, and the wholesale preparation of lamb for high value hotel/restaurant outlets at Top Cut Food Industries at Epsom.

Valuable lessons were learnt in the areas of lamb processing and feedback, as well as market requirements for lamb.

For many producers, this trip was their first opportunity to witness the processing of lamb beyond the farm gate.

The aim of the trip was to:

1. Expose lamb producers to operations at meatworks;
2. Demonstrate feedback processes at meatworks;
3. Obtain objective feedback on lamb assessed as part of Cryptorchid demonstration;
4. Emphasise the importance of quality assurance for and accurate description of lamb through firsthand observation of quality aspects which affect meat processing;



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 Stephen Feighan - MLA Project Manager, Producer Delivery and Adoption.

Tel (02) 9463 9245 or
sfeighan@mlla.com.au

5. Increase awareness of further processing of lamb carcasses beyond the slaughter works;
6. Demonstrate the economics of lean versus fat lamb to the processor; and
7. Discuss the range of market requirements for lamb.

The Top Cut Foods tour provided an excellent and unique insight into requirements of the hospitality trade (fatness, portion control etc). In addition, the cutting demonstration (Fatscore 2 vs Fatscore 4 hindquarter) provided a visible measure of the degree to which fatness affects meat yield and profitability of the value-adding sectors of the industry.

Sire selection

The sire selection demonstration proved to be an outstanding success, despite being brought to an early finish by a very dry spring where it was conducted at Hawkesdale.

The lambs were originally destined to be carried into the autumn to be sold as heavyweights. However, following assessment of the lambs and their pasture in December, and some predictions made with the help of Grazfeed, the producer decided to sell them into the strong pre- Christmas market. Even at trade weights, a \$2.20/head advantage was attributed to the progeny of high ranking Lambplan rams.

A mob of 300 Romney-Corriedale ewes was randomly split into two equal mobs for joining to Texel-Poll Dorset rams (late March). One mob of 150 ewes was joined to three of the top ranking 'blue dot' rams (i.e. from the top 25% of their year group).

The other 150 ewes were joined to four average ranking green dot rams (i.e. from the 25% of the rams ranked third out of four of their year group). Rams were ranked using LAMBPLAN, on an index with a weighting of 60% for growth rate, 20% for leanness and 20% for eye muscle area.

The two mobs were run together during pregnancy, and separated for the lambing to marking period (about 5 weeks).

The ewes lambed over a six-week period, beginning 20 August.

Lambs were marked on September 28, the two mobs of ewes and lambs were boxed in the same paddock after marking.

The lambs were designated to be run as one mob until sale (as either suckers or weaned lambs), with feedback (carcase weight, fatscore, and financial returns) to be obtained at slaughter in order to evaluate the difference in returns from the two groups of rams.

The lambs were weighed in December, at an average age of 13–14 weeks. The producer group met to assess the lambs and the paddock in which they were to be placed, and to make some judgements about their prospects.

The Grazfeed computer program helped with this process, using the data collected from lambs and pasture.



It was generally felt that prospects for finishing the lambs to heavy weights without expensive supplementation were poor, given the extremely dry spring conditions being experienced in the Willatook district.

The lambs were assessed as being in good condition, at the top end of the Fat Score 3 range. In light of the above, and given the strong lamb market prevailing at the time, the owners decided to sell their lambs the following week.

The lamb weights and assessment at this stage have been used as a basis for comparison and financial evaluation. Based on the liveweight differences at this assessment, and using a carcass price of \$2.30/kg, the Blue Dot lambs returned an extra \$2.20/head at this age.

Using comparative figures from this demonstration, the superior LAMBPLAN ranked rams (i.e. 'Blue Dot') could be expected to generate additional gross income of \$484 over a four-year working life, when compared with the 'Green Dot' rams.

This is based on the assumption that each ram sires 55 marketable lambs per year, which are sold at an average weight. This figure could conceivably be greater where lambs are grown out to heavier weights.

Marketing options studied by the group have included both 'Over the Hooks' and CALM. Lambs marketed as part of the O'Keefe Cryptorchid demonstration, and followed through the meatworks, were sold OTH to Herds, with the feedback and grid-pricing summary creating much interest.

Members also followed through the process of selling lambs via CALM during March, when a draft of lambs belonging to members Colin and Andrew Graham, Yambuk, was offered for sale.

Discussion

Among a range of positive outcomes members gained were:

- improved skills in the assessment of pastures for both quality and quantity, and a set of pasture quality-quantity benchmarks for meeting various sheep production targets;
- improved skills in the assessment of lambs for management and marketing purposes;
- improved understanding of processor requirements for lamb, coupled with a greater appreciation of how these are dictated by consumers;
- experience in getting feedback from a processor on a draft of lambs;
- first hand experience of the financial benefits to be gained with the use of proven superior sires, as tested under LAMBPLAN; and
- first hand appreciation of the marketing option provided by CALM.

As a result, participants are better positioned to more confidently supply different markets by implementing changes in their lamb production and marketing management, said project co-ordinator Martin Dunstan.

MLA also recommends

Sheep Genetics Australia

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This confidence came from the firsthand involvement in the activities and demonstrations conducted, rather than learning about these techniques at a seminar or field day.

But more work was required in pasture and livestock assessment, marketing, achieving higher carcase weights and benchmarking.

"Although the PIRD program has resulted in significant gains for some group members, ongoing activity will be required to ensure this process remains permanent.

"Activities incorporating pasture and lamb assessment, and processor feedback should be part of the group's ongoing program."

He said more work was required to bring about an increase in over-the-hooks sales and forward contracts, through CALM or through alliances.

Most of the group lamb in mid-winter to produce lambs for sale around Christmas/New Year. About 10–20% of weaned lambs are carried on into autumn.

A minority of members target the heavy lamb market.

"This strategy is very much the product of tradition, and some analysis and local demonstration is required to determine the most profitable target weight for market lambs coming out of this district."

Meat and Livestock Australia

Level 1, 165 Walker Street

North Sydney NSW 2060

Tel (02) 9463 9333

Fax (02) 9463 9393

Free Phone 1800 023 100 (Australia only)

www.mla.com.au

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