



Transitioning to Non-Mulesed Sheep

Producer case study: Mark Tiedemann

Background

Mark Tiedemann of Summerhill Pastoral runs a 1,315ha mixed farming system located near Young, NSW. Mark currently manages 4,200 breeding ewes (Merino) from which he collects body weights, fleece data and reproduction information on to identify which ewes have the greatest genetic potential. The higher performing ewes are used in a small nucleus flock which Mark uses to breed his own Merino rams, while the lower performing ewes are joined to terminal sires. This allows Mark to remove undesirable genetics from his Merino flock while diversifying his income streams through a prime lamb enterprise. Additionally, through the data collection process and ram selection Mark has been able to improve fleece weights while reducing the overall micron within his commercial flock.

Mark's breeding objective focuses on breeding a dual-purpose sheep that is plain bodied, has good growth, fat and muscle while improving wool quality, increasing fleece weight and reducing micron. Mark's breeding program allows him to turn off wethers at a younger age and apply pressure to reproduction traits.



Image 1 Mark Tiedemann has been non-mulesed since the 2021 drop pictured.

For the past 21 years, Mark has been selective when purchasing rams and semen to use within his breeding programs. This breeding objective has supported Mark's move to a non-mulesed enterprise in 2021, prompting him to identify other important welfare traits such as Dag and Worm Egg Counts (WEC), to now include in his breeding selections.

Why did you choose to move to non-mulesed?

Mark's involvement with the Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) funded Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project "Transitioning to Non-Mulesed Sheep" within the South West Slopes (SWS) NSW Region promoted the decision to shift to non-mulesing, as he felt he would be supported by the other producers who were also making the transition. At the time the project commenced in January 2021, Mark also felt increasing pressure from the Sheep and Wool industry to refrain from mulesing his lambs, due to animal welfare concerns.

"I thought we were going to have to (go non-mulesed) in the near future and figured it was time to make the change."

Mark found it profitable to transition to non-mulesing when he did, as there were financial gains from wool premiums and a high demand from people seeking to purchase non-mulesed wethers, which drove sale prices up at the time.

"The time was right, and I didn't like mulesing much anyway."

What steps did you take to transition to non-mulesed? How long has it taken you to get there?

A breeding objective that strives to produce plainer bodied animals gave Mark an advantage during his transition as his stock were far less wrinkly at the beginning of the project, compared to others in the SWS NSW Group. With the commencement of the project in 2021, Mark felt confident with how plain his stock were and ceased mulesing on the 2021 drop. Since then, Mark has continued not to mules lambs born on his property.

"I have been on a plainer bloodline for the past 21 years, and I probably could have done it (gone non-mulesed) a few years ago if needed, but I hadn't."

What has been some benefits of going non-mulesed?

"It has helped to manage my worm burden as I lamb down in September and I was not able to move my ewe and lamb mobs because the mulesing wounds on the lambs needed time to heal after marking. Now I can move them to other paddocks after marking if I need to."

A surprising benefit Mark witnessed from moving to a non-mulesed flock was the flexibility to move the ewes and lambs to a new paddock sooner after lamb marking. Throughout the course of the project Mark received a significant amount of rainfall and witnessed a spike in worm burden at the time of lambing in September, which is a relatively late time to lamb down for the region. Having the option to move ewes with marked lambs off potentially contaminated pastures with ease has reduced the stress of this event. Mark's use of a long-acting pain relief at lamb marking proved advantageous as well, as it reduced the stress of the marking process, allowing them to quickly reunite with their mothers, improving the welfare of his stock overall.

Have you made any changes to your management since moving to non-mulesed?

"Not a lot has changed but I have moved the time of crutching."

Mark has routinely shorn his sheep every six months, and originally would crutch these sheep two weeks prior to shearing. However, since moving to non-mulesed, Mark has decided to change this to one month prior to shearing to reduce the risk of breech strike in his stock before shearing. Other than this minor change of date, Mark's calendar of operations has not been modified significantly.

Having a non-mulesed flock has meant that Mark now monitors his stock more routinely and therefore he is intercepting the occurrence of disease, flystrike and parasites earlier, particularly in his younger and more vulnerable stock, such as his wethers and weaners.

Knowing what you know now, what would you change about how you transitioned?

"I don't think I would change anything because our sheep were already plain and I had you guys (SheepMetriX and the SWS NSW Group) around for support and guidance. It would be a different story if we didn't have plain body sheep already."

Mark's transition was a smooth one due to the genetic foundations he had prior to the project commencement. His increased confidence from the support provided through the involvement with the SWS NSW Group and the SheepMetriX team further encouraged the move to non-mulesing.

What would you recommend to people who are thinking of going down the non-mulesed pathway?

"It takes time! Make sure the sheep are plain and keep an eye on the shape and structure."

Mark's recommendation for anyone thinking of heading down the non-mulesed pathway, is to ensure they have a plan and set targets and goals to meet, prior to ceasing mulesing. Mark also encourages that ease of management comes from "keeping an eye on" structure and conformation of stock.

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