Exploring the use of eID to improve sheep production

Producer case study: Alan Bennett

Bennett Family Farm

Alan and Donna Bennett, their children Ellen and Luke, and a working man, run a 14,000ha mixed farming business at Lawloit and Telopea Downs.

Over a time of business growth and risk management, Bennett's have been increasing the area managed for stock to reach a 50:50 ratio of livestock and cropping enterprises, now consisting of 8000 self-replacing Merino ewes producing 10,000 lambs, and 8,000 ha of cropping, sold as grain and used for grazing.

Setting up eID for monitoring

This Bennetts aim to improve the labour and time efficiency on their property, while maintaining good management practices and low stress stock handling.

Image 1 Alan Bennett provides good nutrition for lamb survival

While the farm has five labour units, they are kept very busy with livestock and cropping operations, including two times of shearing which take several weeks each time. Any savings in labour and time are valuable to keep operations timely and efficient.

The Bennetts started out with an eID wand when sheep eID became mandatory in Victoria, and already had a Prattley 3-way autodraft and scales installed with a XR5000 screen.

They soon realised that having a panel reader would create better efficiency in the yards, which was eventually installed after delays caused by Covid19 supply chain issues.

Measurement for management

The Bennetts have used eID for several applications to track the performance of animals.

Sire group records: To keep track of what group of rams and ewes are producing and use for selecting replacement ewes.

Pregnancy scanning: to record pregnancy status electronically at scanning. Have marked triplets and early and lates some years. So that the scanner can perform their job efficiently and uninterrupted, once pregnancy status groups were identified, ewes were run back through the race, past the eID panel to put the pregnancy status against their eID tag.

Weight gains: record how crossbred and surplus Merino lambs are performing; when lambs will be ready or whether growth rates need lifting.

An evolving management program

Initially, one of the aim's was to reduce the labour required prior to lambing. They had begun scanning ewes but wanted to be able to box different age groups and pregnancy status back together until late pregnancy, so that less paddocks were needed, and there were less mobs to manage.

Once ewes reached late pregnancy, they are drafted into pregnancy status mobs and allocated to different feed paddocks according to their nutritional requirements, i.e. multiples are given the better feed paddocks.

This was useful when lower stock numbers were carried, and some pregnancy status groups only had a small mob of ewes for their age group.

However, as stock numbers grew, there's now enough numbers in each mob that they don't need to be boxed together, and instead ewes are able to run in their drafted mobs by pregnancy status for the whole pregnancy. This helps to get large numbers of ewes out of the yards faster (don't need to go back through the yards), and back to their paddocks.

As well, rather than recording late conceptions, those ewes are put back with the undetected pregnancy ewes, and are picked up by the scanner when they return for a second scanning several weeks later. Any triplet bearing ewes are managed with the twin bearing ewes.

Future for eID with the Bennetts

Alan says the panel reader works well, and they now have good knowledge about collecting, transferring and using data. Ellen is a very capable user and can manage mobs on her own.

Although they won't use eID for as many applications as first thought, it has enabled them to individually track animals with their easy to read tags, so will continue to utilize the technology where they see benefit, e.g. weighing lambs.

Alan acknowledges that for sheep breeding enterprises which concentrate on individual animal records to produce ASBV genetic parameters, that eID recording systems bring immense benefits for data capture and record keeping.

'When machinery guidance was first introduced, for the expense of the technology there was little to gain from sowing in straight lines, perhaps only in preventing overlap. Now that we sow with controlled traffic systems and interrow sow, as well as the technology getting cheaper and software development for easier use, there are many more benefits to be realised. I believe eID will be the same', Alan says.

Image 2 Ellen Bennett standing in cereals grown for grazing

Advice for new entrants

Alan encourages producers to give eID data collection a go.

'If you like data, start small and build your way up from there. Keep it simple, and choose the low handing fruit to begin with. It doesn't cost much money, and if you have the time you can build your skills to make very useful production decisions.'

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