

DSE key to profit

The average stocking rate on Kangaroo Island is less than 10 dry sheep equivalent (DSE) per hectare, while the average for the 38 members of the KI Sheep Production Group is 12 DSE per hectare. Group members are achieving this improved performance by applying management based on an understanding of the pasture and animal systems. This management combines monitoring, benchmarking and a holistic approach to wool and prime lamb production that promotes profitability and sustainability.

Stocking rate and dollars produced per hectare are the key measures of profitable sheep production, according to KI veterinarian Greg Johnsson who has been a key player in the Group since it started in 1995. Although elements of per head performance, such as lambing percentage in a meat production system, are important he said per head performance must not be allowed to cloud the issue of per hectare performance.

“Within the group we have members who have improved their DSE stocking rate per hectare by 40 percent and more, but their production per individual DSE has not changed,” explained Greg.

“You would never measure crop production by grams of grain per plant it is always tonnes per hectare. As we are often integrating cropping and livestock, and want to optimise both enterprises, it also helps to have both systems on the same units of production performance.”

Greg explained that Group members have achieved improvements in performance by tackling the issues in the right order. Firstly issues that can be changed easily and without high capital investment need to be addressed. These include matching livestock demand to pasture growth, time of lambing, time of shearing, flock genetics and flock structure.

Benchmarking results from the Group show that a wool or meat production flock that contains 20% wethers is more profitable than one consisting of 100% ewes. This finding is in line with other sheep production groups in other states. Wethers perform well at higher stocking rates as the majority of their energy requirement is for wool or meat production where the ewe is also producing milk, so cannot be pushed so hard or stocked so tightly.

Another first stage change is the use of monitoring systems and preventative animal health programs. For example by implementing improved grazing management and animal nutrition combined with maximising the sheep's fundamental immunity to worms, drenches can be used tactically as a preventative rather than reactively as a control tool. When used reactively the worm burden will already be suppressing performance.

Having started to generate cost savings and/or improved returns Greg then encourages Group members to invest on increased fertiliser inputs and improved pasture management. To achieve a high level of pasture utilisation some additional investment in fencing and watering points may be required.

Only when the first two stages have been successfully adopted does Greg even consider the expensive exercise of pasture renovation.

“The marginal return on pasture renovation can be poor due to loss of production, especially if carried out before good levels of pasture utilisation are being achieved.”

The KI Sheep Production Group, which is unique in SA, meets several times through the year and has access to information from the Group's Focus Farm. As in any farming systems group individual members implement recommendations in their own system but at the Focus Farm, owner John Symons has agreed to implement best management practices as defined by Greg Johnsson and the Group. The focus farm has been running since 1999 when it was the third lowest for profit on the benchmark table. Adoption of best management practice for the past five years has seen John Symons farm rise to the third highest for profit.

“These principles can be implemented across the state and are not specific to conditions on Kangaroo Island,” said Greg.

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