

Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM)- stopping the flock's decline

The situation- The national sheep flock has declined substantially in the last 20 years (Fig. 1) to levels that threaten the future of the sheep industry and the established markets that exist for lamb and sheep meat.

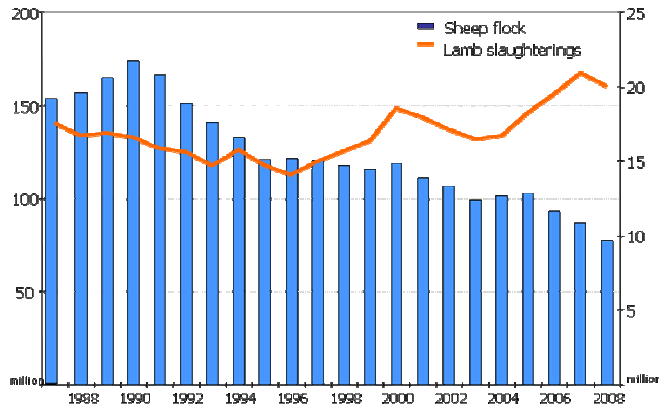


Figure 1. National flock trends

National flock changes in last 20 years-

- from over 170 million sheep to less than 75 million sheep
- from over 75 million ewes to less than 43 million breeding ewes,
- increased lamb slaughter rates to over 20 million lambs per annum

Since 1990 national lamb marking rates have not improved (Table 1) and with the current turnoff rates of sheep and lambs the national flock will continue to erode. To bring the sheep population to a plateau and still deliver the baseline turnoff of sheep, lambs and live exports, marking rates need to increase by 12%.

Table 1. Trends in average marking rates since 1990

Enterprise sector	Average marking rate (1990-1999)	Average marking rate (2000-2005)
Prime lamb specialists	84	85
Sheep specialists	73	71
Mixed sheep enterprise	75	74
Sheep industry total	77	77

The solution- LTEM delivers on-average a 15% increase in marking rates

The LTEM program delivered by RIST has addressed the industry challenge by improving producers understanding of the impacts of ewe nutrition on the performance of the ewe and her progeny. LTEM has developed producers' skills and confidence to manage their ewes to achieve condition score targets that have optimised stocking rates, increased lamb survival, improved animal welfare and greater whole farm profitability (Table 2). The gross value of these productivity gains was about \$50/ha or \$50,000/farm.

Table 2. Changes in productivity among LTEM participants

	2005 (pre- LTEM)	2008 (post- LTEM)
Farm size (ha)	1176	1194
Stocking rate (dse/ha)	12.2	13.9
Lambing % (Crossbred)	111	126
Lambing % (Merino to Merino)	73	84
Lambing % (Merino to other)	82	92
Ewe mortality per annum (%)	4.5	2.5

What producers think of LTEM-

Over 300 producers that manage almost 2 million ewes have participated in LTEM since 2006. Independent evaluations have found;

- an overall satisfaction rating of 8.6 out of 10 (ranging from 7 to 10)
- 91% of participating producers have recommended LTEM to other producers

'By following the data and recommendations, we have in one season been able to lift our performance by an average of 25% or 4000 lambs'. (Gordon Dickinson- Nareen Station, Casterton).

Key changes in management practice-

LTEM is structured to maximize knowledge retention and practice change. The program has had profound impacts on the management practices undertaken by participants (Table 3).

Table 3. Trends in management practice among LTEM participants

Management practice	% of producers	
	2005 (pre- LTEM)	2008 (post- LTEM)
Condition scoring ewes	5	96
Assess pastures- quality/quantity	33	98
Pregnancy scan for multiples	17	64
Joining length of 5 weeks or less	35	80
Manage ewes to condition score targets at key times	9	98

Whole-farm profit analysis of LTEM-

An independent financial analysis of LTEM found the benefits for producers from participating in LTEM arise from 2 avenues (*source: John Young, Farming Systems Analysis, Western Australia*);

1. Increases in efficiency due to improved understanding of the pasture animal system
2. Adoption of targets for the condition score profile of the ewe flock over the reproduction cycle

The first avenue for achieving benefits, through increasing efficiency, is primarily from improving pasture utilisation and stocking rate. The changes producers make to their systems result from;

1. the knowledge gained about animal requirements and pasture growth
2. the monitoring of feed-on-offer and animal performance on their farm
3. discussion with other producers on how to implement this in their farm system

The other avenue for achieving benefits relates to having the correct targets for reproducing ewes at key times. This can increase profit even for producers who are operating at optimal stocking rates. The benefit of managing ewes to the optimum condition score profile can be up to \$5-7/ewe for Merino enterprises and \$10-12/ewe for prime lamb enterprises.

Changing the condition score profile of the ewes affects profit through its impact on flock productivity and through the cost of providing feed. Improving the ewes' condition score profile will result in:

1. decreased ewe mortality
2. increased lamb birth weights and hence lamb survival
3. the progeny cutting more wool that is finer

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