EverGraze
More livestock from perennials

More perennials
Better livestock
Healthier catchments

Case Study

Split Joining put into practice

David Hewlett produces fine Merino wool at his 800ha property, "Blackburn" near Yass in NSW.

He has implemented a Split Joining system based on current EverGraze research to capitalise on the demand for cross bred store lambs.

He spoke with Jim Meckiff about the flexibility Split Joining has given him in his operation.

farm info.

Producer: David and Jenny Hewlett

Location: Yass, NSW

Property size: 800ha

Soils: Brown sandy loam to yellow clay on lower slopes

Enterprises: 3,500 Merino ewes plus progeny

Pastures: Mix of phalaris and sub clover, some oats, lucerne, 60% native perennial grasses

"I started joining Merino ewes to a Dorset ram four weeks ahead of the main Merino flock.

The ewes selected for joining to the Dorset ram are the older ewes and culls that are not wanted in the Merino flock.

The cross bred lambs are sold each year at the end of November", he said.

By lambing a few weeks earlier than the rest of the flock, the cross bred lambs gain a little more weight and present a little heavier at the store sales.

The cross bred lambs help increase production per ha/ewe, which helps cash flow and reduces accumulated debts as a result of the drought.

If the spring does turn out to be 'average' then the pastures can be better utilised due to the higher stocking rate of heavier lambs.

I pregnancy scan the ewes in May and June to identify the wet, dry, twins and singles.

Early and late lambing ewes are separated to allow more efficient supplementary feeding.

Dry ewes are culled before the winter feed deficit starts to bite, so valuable pasture growing in winter is utilised by productive sheep.

'Blackburn' has extensive shelter belts that stretch the length of the property.

This shelter, combined with suitably sized paddocks for lambing allows me to split mobs and manage them according to nutritional requirements.

David Hewlett

Small mobs of 150 ewes, with a mix of older and maiden twin bearing ewes, are put in paddocks with the best feed and best shelter with a base pasture target of 1200kg DM/ha early in winter.

By lambing time, these pastures would be growing at 20+kg DM/ha/day with a stocking rate matched to pasture growth.

Single bearing ewes are put in mobs of around 300 and a pasture

key points

- Split Joining provides flexible management options and marketing opportunities
- Early cross bred lambs increases profit
- Pregnancy scanning allows improved management of ewes according to their nutritional needs

"Its all about keeping my options open and having flexibility in a variable season."

Twin bearing ewes are placed in paddock with the best feed and shelter belts

base of 700kg DM/ha in early June. Pasture growth is expected to pick up by the last trimester of gestation. If supplementary feeding is required then a grain ration is fed in the paddock.

I have been pleasantly surprised the last few years with Merino weaning percentages of over 110%.

It's better in the cross bred lambs, of course, but not bad considering the seasons handed out in the last few years.

The beauty about the Split Joining system is, it has provided me with opportunities to keep my options open and creates flexibility to deal with varying seasonal conditions."

science behind the story

One of the new systems being researched by EverGraze is Split Joining. This involves some Merino ewes being joined in February to a terminal sire, with the aim of finishing these crossbred lambs by the end of the year. The remaining ewes are joined in April to a Merino sire to generate replacement ewes.

Jim Meckiff, Regional EverGraze Coordinator, said the Split Joining system provides flexibility by allowing time for July born cross bred lambs to reach saleable weights from perennial pastures or be sold off their mothers, depending on the season and feed availability. The rest of the ewes give birth to Merino lambs in September, which enable replacement ewes to be generated and wether lambs to be either sold at weaning or finished to heavier weights.

"This means we can carry more ewes than a flock that all lamb in July, which increases production and profit/ha," Jim said. "Although fewer ewes are carried than a flock lambing only in September, the system generates a similar amount of meat/ha, as lambs can be finished on farm in most seasons due to perennial pastures extending spring pasture growth."

"In comparison, while there might be more lambs from the September-only lambing flocks, often they can't be finished on farm unless provided with supplementary feed," he added.

Computer simulations undertaken ahead of the on ground studies suggest that the Split Joining system can achieve a gross margin of $440 /ha compared to $300/ha for traditional ewe systems and $490/ha for riskier later-lambing systems. These simulations were undertaken based on average rainfall patterns at a mid-winter stocking rate of 13DSE/ha, on a perennial pasture base which included paddocks of phalaris and lucerne.

Jim said there were a number of benefits for farmers using the Split Joining system. These include the potential to grow more kg lamb/ha and reducing the amount of supplementary feed required by utilising the perennial pasture.

A fact sheet on Split Joining is available at www.evergraze.com.au

contact

Jim Meckiff
P: (02) 6942 4957
E: jim.meckiff@dpi.nsw.gov.au

www.evergraze.com.au

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