

Lambing Results

It's great to witness the increased attention producers are now putting on lamb survival. Of course higher weaning rates is still the main game. But increasingly it's the producers striving for better results who now appreciate that improving lamb survival rates is the key. The other element of improved weaning rates – higher scanning rates – is almost as straight forward task by comparison. We see adult Merino ewes regularly achieving 140%+ when in ideal joining condition. We expect our meat breed sheep to achieve at least 150%, with some now aiming for 180%+. Getting high rates of lambs 'on board' is not difficult, getting good survival rates at the other end of pregnancy is often the challenging part.

So what are we aiming for?

Lifetime Ewe Management suggests a Merino ewe producer should be aiming for 90% survival in single-bearing ewes and 75% survival in twins (i.e. marking 150% lambs from a mob of twin-bearers). For crossbred or meat focussed flocks the targets are a little higher at 95% for singles and 80% for twins. The targets are not aspirational! They are now being achieved by many producers on a regular basis.

Bringing about improvement!

The majority of sheep producers now scan. This has been a huge step forward allowing us to:

1. Tailor nutritional requirements of single and multiple bearing ewes for improved outcomes; and
2. Measure our ability to take foetuses through to a live lamb (our management!).

As we often hear, if we don't measure it how on earth are we going to improve it!

As managers of extensive, 'free-range' flocks, the threat of Mother Nature is a given. A time of lambing that avoids the threat of severe wind-chill in southern Australia does not exist! But it's not an excuse for a business to pretend that management doesn't have a part to play. Management is the element that we control and there is almost no end to the number of management options available.

For an independent review of management practices being used within your own business to maximise reproduction please contact the Yendon office on 03 5341 6100.



Article by James Whale

Making the most from Farm Profitability

For the first time in many years the stars seem to be aligning for most farmers. Beef, lamb and wool prices are all strong and seasonal conditions are pretty good for most. Wheat prices are the only real concern, but are looking better in recent months.

For most, this means that the 2016/17 financial year was a profitable one and with this golden window of opportunity emerging, the questions are being asked – what should I do with these profits? There is no right answer to this question except that it depends! It depends on your current financial and personal position, the aims and aspirations of you and your family, your attitude to risk and debt, and maybe even your stage in life.

Surplus funds at the end of the year can be used to reduce debt, carry out repairs and maintenance that may have been neglected for years, or do some capital improvements such as that new hay shed or even a new kitchen. Alternatively, it can be used to really set the business up to cope with anything prices or weather can throw at it. This might include rebuilding the yards to make tasks more efficient, redesigning paddock sizes and fencing to allow for more effective rotational grazing, addressing soil fertility deficiencies and renovating pastures. Many of these tasks will help drive higher stocking rates and potentially lead to a more productive, profitable and resilient farm.

Spending in some areas may seem obvious. In many cases, plans have been on the backburner for years just waiting for the funds to become available. However, some thinking outside the square might be valuable. For example surplus funds could be used on expert advice to establish a succession or strategic plan, or even used for off farm investments or superannuation.

It's important that you use some sort of informed decision making and don't just rely on gut feeling or emotion. A major tool available to assist these decisions is a cash flow budget. Don't forget also, that there are a range of professionals to help you make the right decisions for you and your family, including your accountant, agronomist, as well as the diverse range of consultants within Meridian Agriculture.



Article by Paul Blackshaw

Tissue Testing

Why take tissue tests and what can we get out of them?

The late winter/ early spring period is when plants have had reasonable pressure from the cold, and potentially the wet depending on where you are in Victoria, and they are now actively starting to grow. This means that their demand for

nutrients is increasing significantly. As a result, tissue testing at this time of year is a very good window into whether or not you are marginal or deficient in either a macro or a trace element.

Lots of nutrients from a soil point of view can be accurately assessed. You can tell phosphorus, potassium and sulphur from soil testing and can be quite confident about these results. However a lot of our trace elements (for example, copper, zinc, boron, molybdenum) are required by the plant in relatively small amounts and therefore soil tests are not accurate enough to tell whether those nutrients are needed or not. A tissue test is the most effective way of finding out whether our plants are deficient in these trace elements.

If you are looking to diagnose mineral deficiencies for plant health or plant growth, then you need to test specific plants, for example a specific species (sub clover, ryegrass, white clover, phalaris). Once the species is chosen there is also a need to test a specific plant part, usually the youngest fully open leaf. In a lot of pastures our most sensitive plant is our legume, they are the most responsive to trace elements, so you start with what I call the 'canary in the sandmine'. You are looking for the most responsive plant and so need to test the legume component of your pastures. In most cases that is sub clover and you need to be taking the younger, fresh growing leaves for testing. This will give you the best diagnosis. It is also important to record what growth stage the plant was up to (i.e. pre or post flowering), as when you take the sample and send it to the lab (or whoever is interpreting that data) they need to know what plant growth stage it is up to.

With tissue testing, you will be able to diagnose potassium, phosphorus and sulphur deficiencies, as well as other trace elements. In paddocks that haven't been grazed for some time, older and new leaves are evident and you can also see potassium deficiencies occurring.

Sub clover with potassium deficiency



Tissue testing for animal health – deficiencies as a guide:

If you are looking to monitor selenium, cobalt and copper levels for animal health, mixed herbage samples from pasture's can be a good place to start. This involves taking random toe cuts of pasture (around 20 to 25 samples) from across the paddock – this includes everything that the stock would be eating, avoiding urine patches (because generally stock will feed around these) and also avoiding anything that has manure in it from recent growth. This can then be sent away for analysis to identify the critical levels of cobalt and selenium in particular. For copper, this is examined in conjunction with sulphur and molybdenum levels within the plant. We actually look at the copper to molybdenum ratio

plus the available sulphur in the plant as to the likelihood of copper being tied in the rumen and therefore not available to the animal.

In conjunction with mixed herbage tests for trace elements, blood tests will be examined for cobalt, selenium and copper. With copper, probably the best thing for young animals suspecting of copper deficiencies it to also conduct liver tests. The mixed herbage test, which Meridian Agriculture can undertake, combined with with the help of your local vet taking some liver samples, can identify how much copper is actually stored in the animal.

In the south west of Victoria there have been two long wet winters, which affect the availability of copper. There have been a number of farms that are witnessing visible copper deficiencies in their lambs, partly as a result of the wet winters, a long history of very little copper being applied to the pastures and also significant amounts of lime being applied. As production and income have been good, people have applied more lime on pastures, but without monitoring where their copper and molybdenum levels are. Applying lime will increase pH naturally, but this also dramatically increases the availability of molybdenum and higher molybdenum levels will actually bind more copper in the rumen of the animal. It will not affect plant growth, but it does affect the uptake of copper by the animal, hence we are seeing more copper deficiencies which are actually being induced by high molybdenum levels.

For further information or to discuss tissue testing and its benefits, call Meridian Agriculture on 03 5341 6100.

Article by Andrew Speirs

MLA Launches Pasture Trial Network

The Pasture Trial Network (PTN) is a new tool available to southern Australian livestock producers, allowing them unrivalled access to quantitative data about the performance of pasture varieties within southern Australia. The major aims of the PTN are to:

- Support producers to make decisions based on objective data that meets their needs
- Increase confidence with purchasing decisions
- Use improved statistical analysis towards genetics by production regions with control lines so producers can get the best idea of performance of lines in their location.

Meridian Agriculture is proud to have been a contributing partner in the PTN, running one of the trial sites near Casterton. The official PTN website, which houses seasonal dry matter performance data, was launched at the recent Grassland Society of Southern Australia's Annual Conference and will increase the competitive advantage of pasture based industries. With an operational aim to improve the delivery and placement of new pastures species through improved efficiencies and testing, the PTN will also help to further facilitate more effective R&D investment.

PTN is a big step towards industry having pasture information similar to that available on sheep and cattle. To access the PTN website, please [click here](#).

Let's get to know Alistair Cameron



Alistair Cameron is a Workplace Health & Safety Advisor with Meridian Agriculture. We asked Alistair a few questions about himself.

1. You have had a broad exposure to many different workplaces (including farm, pipelines, mines, etc.), which do you prefer to work on and why?

I would have to say farming because of the diversification agriculture provides.

2. What do you think is the biggest opportunity currently for businesses in Australian Agriculture?

Booms and busts are fact of life with Australian Agriculture, use the opportunity when in a boom to insure your business for the bust by improving productivity, lower the cost of production and invest off farm.

3. Tell us about your family and values that are important to your family life?

- Janet & I have been married for 27 years.
- We have 3 daughters Lucy, Katie & Millie plus a golden retriever who thinks she is part of the family.
- My family values are support, interest, love and acceptance.

4. Where did you go to school?

Euroa Primary & then a boarder at Scotch College, Melbourne.

5. What is the most important lesson you have learned in life?

To listen and maintain a balance in all aspects of my life.

6. What is your favourite holiday destination?

Do not have one, just enjoy any holiday that Janet has organised.

7. When reviewing a business, what is the first piece of advice you would give someone?

Have a documented health and safety plan.

8. What do you do outside of work?

Live on a small farm at Molyullah near Benalla, go to the MCG to watch Melbourne with my daughters, visit the King Valley wineries for lunch whenever possible and mow the lawns with a push mower instead of going to the gym.

Farm Sucession

Regular readers of this newsletter will be aware that Mike Stephens is involved in a study on Family Farm Sucession. Some readers have taken part in this study. The study, which is supported by the MLA Donor Company, has involved a series of case studies comparing the attributes, attitudes and actions of families who have handed over a viable farm with those who haven't.

The studies, which cover several generations, are measured against the three aims of having sufficient funds for retirement, handing on a viable farm and providing for the next generation in a way which ensures that they are happy with their deal, both now and in the future. Although the complete cross study analysis is not yet available, there are some strong attributes emerging which seem to be of equal importance.

The first is for the family to have the end game in mind. If that end game is the three aims, the family investments have to grow in a way which allows flexibility in the way the assets can be split up at some time in the future. This may be done by investing an off farm assets or by adding farm land which can be split from the core at a future date.

The second attribute is to ensure cohesion between and within the generations. The business needs to steadily grow to achieve the three aims and this won't happen unless there is absolute commitment from all involved.

The third attribute is respect and trust between and within the generations. We will follow the progress of Mike's study in future editions.



Article by Mike Stephens

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