



Healthy ewes equal more lambs, better wool

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The breeding ewe plays a pivotal role in any wool production system – she is the engine room of the wool business. So it makes sound sense to have her in the right condition at the right time. The Australian Wool Innovation-funded *lifetimewool* project has developed a comprehensive set of guidelines for successful ewe management. The latest release of these are for to producers farming on the southern slopes of New South Wales and in northern Victoria.

At a glance

lifetimewool guidelines for ewe management in the southern slopes of New South Wales and northern Victoria recommends that:

-  Increasing ewe condition should only be done using green feed. It is rarely economical to feed grain to increase condition.
-  Ewes should only lose enough condition during autumn that can be regained using green feed after the break.
-  If ewes are, by reason of a buoyant summer, on a higher starting condition score, continue to follow the shape of the higher profiles rather than lose more condition to start on the lower profile. This approach will still provide high economic return.

The *lifetimewool* project's latest handbook provides southern New South Wales and northern Victorian sheep producers with guidelines for optimising ewe management.

The soon-to-be-released handbook comes as the *lifetimewool* project, jointly funded by Australian Wool Innovation and the State Government agricultural departments of Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, nears completion.

What is the *lifetimewool* project

The aim of the *lifetimewool* project was to optimise Merino ewe nutrition to increase farm profit.

The guidelines were derived from testing carried out at 18 paddock-scale research sites and more than 200 producer demonstration sites across Australia. As a result, the information presented is derived from a broad spectrum of wool growing environments and a large range of Merino bloodlines.

Breeding ewes play a pivotal role in the wool production enterprise. Managing ewes to *lifetimewool* guidelines is based on ensuring ewes are in the optimal condition score during the various stages of their reproduction cycle (joining, pregnancy,

lambing and weaning). By doing this farmers can:

- Improve ewe reproduction;
- Increase progeny fleece weight and lower fibre diameter;
- Increase lamb survival;
- Improve ewe health and survival;
- Increase production and tensile strength of ewe wool;
- And use feed resources more effectively.

Regional guidelines

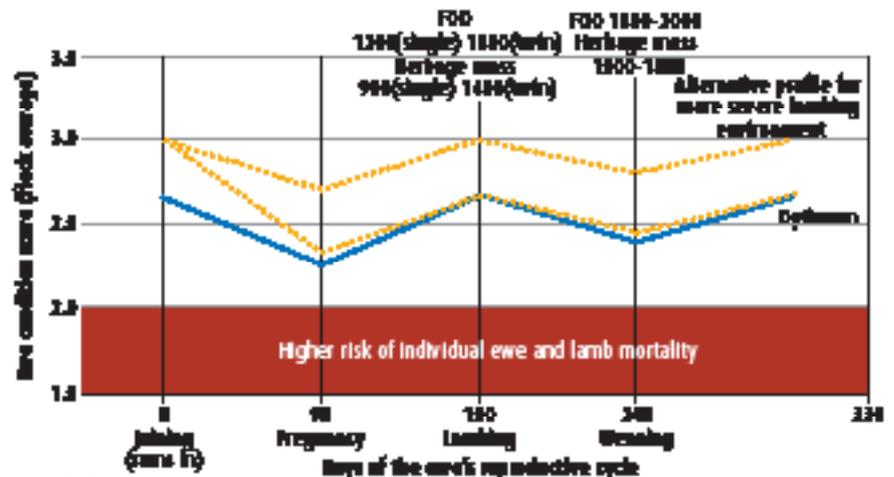
Regional guidelines, for the cereal/sheep zone, high rainfall zone and the WA medium rainfall zone, have so far been developed, with the handbook for the southern slopes of NSW and northern Victoria the latest tool from the *lifetimewool* team.

Sheep breeding down south

The southern slopes of NSW and northern Victoria are characterised by late winter–spring lambing and a winter growing season rainfall of 450–600 millimetres. Pastures are a mixture of annual and perennial grasses and subclover.

The shorter growing season and high production rates affects the potential stocking rate and pasture use and therefore the recommendations for ewe management. In this area, late winter–spring lambing provides the best match of pasture availability to the energy needs of the ewe and lamb. This match can allow more sheep to be run relative to lambing at other times of the year.

FIGURE 1 Optimum condition score profile for Merino ewes, late lambing



Source: *lifetimewool*.



LIVESTOCK:
EWE MANAGEMENT

The optimum profile for spring lambing flocks in the southern slopes is:

- a) To allow a moderate loss (0.3) of condition from joining to 'break of season', provided the condition can be regained prior to lambing on green feed.
- b) To aim for condition score 2.6–3.0 at joining (see Figure 1, page 59).

Condition, condition, condition

According to *lifetimewool* guidelines, the most important target for a ewe is to regain condition lost in early pregnancy before lambing starts. Meeting this target provides the optimum profitability. An alternative option is to start at a higher condition score, lose 0.6 of a condition score and re-gain at least 0.3 by lambing.

Ewes can lose some condition during early pregnancy, but they must regain the condition lost by lambing. There is a trade-off between the cost of re-gaining lost condition and the increase in lamb mortality, especially with twins. Carry out condition gains with green feed as supplementary feed costs are too high to be offset by gains in production. Ewes require 1200 kilograms of dry matter per hectare by lambing for single ewes and 1800kg/dm/ha for twinning ewes to regain lost condition. 

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Putting theory into practice

 **The Lifetime Ewe Management** programme is a practical extension of the *lifetimewool* research. It is a nationally recognised, two-year training course administered by Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST), based in Hamilton, Victoria.

The programme involves groups of four farmers meeting regularly for two years to condition score ewes and assess the available pasture. The course pilot was carried out during 2004–2005 with remarkable results.

"During 2005, one of the toughest seasons on record in Victoria, farmers in the project were able to lift lambing percentage by 10 per cent and decrease ewe mortality by 50%," RIST *lifetimewool* ewe management programme leader, Darren Gordon said. "We knew we were onto a winner then."

There are now 36 groups of four farmers undertaking the programme in Victoria, with a further 20 groups to start the programme at this year's weaning. The programme has also recently expanded to Western Australia.

Darren said the simplicity of the *lifetimewool* guidelines was what made the programme so popular.

"It doesn't involve any gizmos and gadgets. It's just helping farmers take what they have done for years a bit further — using their eyes and hands to make an assessment of their sheep's conditions; and alter their management practice to suit.

"For example, if a farmer's ewes are only in average condition at joining, then they should not be surprised if there is a poor lambing percentage."

The programme provides farmers with the skills to manually condition score their ewes, while taking into account the quantity and quality of available pasture. Visual pasture assessment is a cornerstone of the programme.

Farm information

Farmer
Craig Oliver

Location
Dunkeld, western Victoria

Property size
930ha

Enterprise
19 micron, Merino self-replacing flock, dual-purpose flock using Merino ewes; friesland bull beef

Annual rainfall
650mm



Craig Oliver was a participant in the pilot Lifetime Ewe Management programme during 2005.

Craig and three other local farmers met monthly at each other's properties to condition score ewes, measure pastures and determine whether the available feed would

meet the nutritional needs of the ewes through their reproductive cycle.

"If there wasn't adequate feed, it was a matter of determining how best to fill the gap," Craig said.

He tells *Farming Ahead* people's perception of a ewe's condition varied, in some instances widely but, by the end of the project, the four farmers had developed an accurate condition scoring ability, which was mostly consistent.

"Over the two years for which the programme ran, everybody's skills improved.

"I personally greatly value the skills I learnt — it reinforces the importance of staying focussed and not dropping the ball."

Craig says 2005 was a one of the worst seasons on record for his area but, despite the challenging conditions, he was able make some milestone improvements to his enterprise.

"We lifted lambing percentage by about 10% and ewe mortality was less than 0.2%."

The long-term benefit to Craig's operation has been the evolution of an easier-to-manage flock.

"Because the ewes are generally in better condition, they are healthier. And, as a result, our drenching requirements have decreased."

"The ewes lamb more easily — you could say they almost nest for the first 24 hours after lambing."

While the programme was initially aimed at wool producers, Craig, like other programme participants, has found the principles have benefited his dual-purpose operation.

"By improving the inherent fertility of the Merino we have been able to join less Merino ewes to Merino sires and get the same amount of lambs. The surplus ewes are joined to terminal sires."

Learning about pastures

The lifetime ewe management programme also provided Craig with a better understanding of pastures — how to use them to their potential and the appropriate stocking rates.

"It really has given us more flexibility with the numbers we run — we can tell earlier in spring what our stocking rates should be."

Craig is currently undertaking a significant pasture restoration on his property, replacing annual pastures dominated by onion grass, with plantain, phalaris and sub-clover.

Sheep are an important industry in western Victoria and Craig said many farmers in his area had benefitted from participating in the Lifetime ewe management programme and from employing its principles in the longer term.

Craig predicted the principles of the programme would become even more important as on-farm inputs costs continued to increase.

"Wool has not seen a price lift like that of grain and, to some extent, lamb, so making your enterprises as profitable as possible will be imperative."