

Reactions and Attitudes Associated with the
lifetimewool Project

Amongst

Consultants and extensionist involved in sheep production

**A summary of the interaction between the
lifetimewool Project and consultants in 2004**

lifetimewool

more lambs, better wool, healthy ewes

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1. Introduction

Consultants are an important link in the dissemination of lifetimewool's key messages, particularly to the innovative farmers who will be the first to adopt the lifetime wool message. Having consultants on side will be important to the success of the lifetimewool Project.

The project would like consultants and extensionists to be disseminating information from lifetimewool to their clients and assisting clients with their understanding of the lifetimewool principles. To do this the consultants and extensionists will need to have an understanding of the research outcomes and how they can be used in farmer's systems and have learnt any new skills that are required.

Therefore the earlier consultants are involved in the project, the quicker the ownership of the project by them will be. The evaluation plan includes direct contact during the project to discuss the lifetimewool project to find out the best way to get consultants involved. As part of this plan a survey of consultants and extensionists and an informal meeting with consultants were done to find out what the consultants think about the research and how they would like to get involved.

This report provides a summary of the survey and a meeting with consultants done in Hamilton.

2. The lifestimewool Project survey of Wool Consultants and Government Extension Officers

2.1 Executive Summary

In May 2004, 51 service providers who provide advice to wool producers across Australia were surveyed to find out what they recommend in regard to the management of ewe nutrition. The informants comprised 26 private sector consultants and 25 government extension officers from five states of Australia.

The majority of these wool service providers thought that wool producers neither actively manage ewe nutrition nor monitor the condition of ewes systematically. They suggest that most producers rely almost exclusively on visual assessment of ewe condition throughout the year.

Service providers generally understand and promote the benefits of good nutritional management of ewes to their clients. However, only half of extension officers and 64% of consultants directly advise clients about condition scoring. Some stated that getting farmers to do systematic condition scoring would prove challenging, due to various farmer and production related constraints.

Advice given by consultants and extension officers on recommended ewe conditions during key reproductive stages (joining, gestation, lactation) varies. There are mixed messages among service providers regarding optimum ewe conditions for breeding and wool production. Nevertheless, the consultants and extension officers generally knew about the effects of good ewe nutrition and condition on ewe reproductive performance, lamb quality and ewe wool production. Most know about dam nutritional effects on establishment of secondary follicles in the developing foetus and increased wool production in the progeny, but are less aware of the effect ewe nutrition has on micron and lifetime performance.

The majority of consultants, and some extension officers, expressed positive opinions of the LTW project, seeing much value in the research trials. However, there were

some reservations, especially amongst extension officers, and these were generally associated with a lack of communication of LTW results and messages. At this early stage, most respondents were still waiting to find out more, in particular the results of the economic analyses. Despite these reservations almost all consultants and extension officers who took part in the survey wish to become involved or more involved with LTW. This indicates that service providers regard the work of LTW as relevant and potentially useful to their clients.

2.2 Ewe nutrition

The survey wanted to document what the consultants and extensionists knew about how farmers monitor ewe condition and the farmer's attitude towards monitoring ewe condition. The close association between these two groups means that consultants understand what makes these farmers do what they do and how they can influence farmer's current practice. This section summarises consultants and extension officer's beliefs about current practices and attitudes towards ewe nutrition.

2.2.1 Observations and opinions of wool producers' management of ewe nutrition

Wool-producers lack knowledge and expertise in managing ewe nutrition and many practice reactive feeding i.e. only feed-out when ewes have already lost condition, Some producers don't seek advice on this topic because they are confident that they know what they are doing,

Some producers intentionally keep ewes in minimum condition because they believe this is profitable,

The majority of wool-producers only assess ewe condition by eye, and those few that weigh or condition score do not do it very often and

Some production systems constrain producers' opportunities to monitor and manage the condition of their ewes adequately.

2.2.2 The producer approach to assessing ewe condition

The majority (95%) of informants said that visual assessment in the paddock or yards was the only or the main method used by producers to assess ewe condition.

A common view is that when producers do assess the condition of the ewes it is not done systematically or often enough.

Some informants defended this practice suggesting that producers are accurate in their visual assessment, and that their ability to assess ewe condition systematically is limited by the scale of the farm or by labour

2.2.3 Advice regarding ewe condition

Generally, results showed that there is little consistency in advice by service providers on how to manage ewe condition during the crucial stages; joining, gestation and lactation. Recommended condition scores range between 2 and 4.

2.2.4 The effect of improved ewe nutrition on the amount and quality of wool produced

The majority of consultants and at least half of the extension officers were aware of the impact of poor nutrition (finer wool, breaks, poor tensile strength and less uniformity) and conversely, the benefits of better nutrition on ewe wool production.

Generally, the effects of good ewe nutrition on progeny fleece weight were well understood, yet, 25-33% did not know what the effect on micron would be in the progeny. Not all respondents mentioned the lifetime effects on progeny wool production.

2.3 lifetimewool Project

This section summarises consultants and extension officer's awareness and opinion of the lifetimewool Project.

2.3.1 Awareness of LTW and current involvement

The majority of consultants and most extension officers knew about LTW.

Most consultants and extension officers who have heard of LTW have at least a basic understanding of LTW project objectives.

One third of consultants and extension officers are currently indirectly or directly involved with the LTW project.

2.3.2 Consultants' and Extension Officers' Opinions of LTW

Most consultants thought highly of the project.

Only a quarter of extension officers thought highly of the project.

Many reservations concerned respondents' lack of access to the project messages or specific results.

Many service providers want to know more about the economic outcomes of LTW ideas.

Consultants would like to be consulted more by LTW, kept informed of project results and be involved in relevant activities when they occur.

Extension officers would like to be kept informed of project results and have input into the formulation of extension materials/strategies for dissemination of LTW messages.

2.3.3 Influence of LTW messages

At this early stage, five consultants and one extension officer already feel they have been influenced as a direct result of LTW messages; a few more felt they have been indirectly influenced.

The majority of service providers said it was too soon for them to be influenced by the LTW messages.

A number of service providers are waiting to find out what the main messages were and particularly what the economic benefits would be for producers.

2.3.4 Interest in the LTW project and means of communication

Most consultants and extension officers are interested in being involved with LTW.

The majority of consultants are interested in having LTW speak to clients or write articles for them.

Overall, newsletters were the most popular choice of LTW 'activities' for service providers.

There was a high level of interest in project sites and field days by consultants.

The best way to communicate with wool-producer service providers is by email.

2.4 Conclusions

Generally the LTW project is viewed in a very positive manner by most consultants, with some qualifying that their support is dependent on further results of the current research. Many informants see the research to be highly credible, and potentially valuable in terms of increasing profitability.

Consultants have reservations because they feel they have not had sufficient communication and information from the LTW project and the results of cost/benefit analysis of keeping ewes in better condition have not been released. Some are also sceptical about the relevance of results in their clients' farming systems and regions. The main reservation extension officers have is with the potential difficulties in disseminating LTW messages. Some are also concerned about the possibly limited relevance of LTW messages across a range of wool enterprises.

Despite these concerns, the majority of consultants and extension staff were interested in being involved in LTW or being kept informed about LTW results and messages.

In conclusion, this research has found that LTW could benefit by investing in the following areas:

Develop effective liaison and communication strategies with key service providers (e.g. setting up email lists and a LTW newsletter/website, creating a LTW CD Rom, hosting discussion forums or focus groups).

Further dissemination of the beneficial ewe nutritional strategies at joining, during gestation and lactation, to wool producer service providers

Complete and disseminate economic analyses.

Disseminate the LTW results in a simple and clear format that service providers can easily pass on to their clients.

Explore and disseminate potential limitations of LTW ideas in different enterprises and regions (e.g. by practical demonstration - plan a wider distribution of on-farm sites, or by developing a computer model where LTW ideas can be tested in different farming systems, types of wool enterprises and with different management objectives).

3. Workshop with Consultants in Hamilton

3.1 Executive Summary

3.2 Research approach and methods

A meeting with consultant was held in Hamilton on the 7th June 2004. The meeting aimed to find out what consultants wanted from the project to provide practical advice to their clients. The meeting also got feedback from the consultants about any information they thought was missing from the projects outcomes. This meeting was the first of its kind since the beginning of the Project, so was effectively a pilot for how future meetings will be run.

The meeting had the following format;

Getting the consultants to give a few comments on their key business, find out what they want from the project and the areas they consult.

Presenting the projects objectives and logic.

Presenting the projects key activities and timetable.

Presenting the key messages form lifestimewool.

Get consultants feedback about the results from the consultant and department extension staff phone survey.

The meeting had five consultants that specialised in sheep production;

David Rendell

David consults in high rainfall areas with high stocking rates. Runs drench trials to find out how worms link to nutrition. David is involved with 134 properties and 1.5% of Australia's sheep flock.

Graham Lean

Graham consults within a 50km radius of Hamilton.

Jason Tromph

Jason consults to a Bestwool group in Glenthompson. He wants to know how to better manage ewe flocks.

Peter S

Peter consults to seven Bestwool groups. Pastures are his main area and he does a lot of 1 on 1 consulting about pastures. Peter has clients from the Border to Ballarat. He has training in pastures and involved in PPP and PROGRAZE.

John Webb Ware

3.3 Feedback on lifetime wool

Most of the feedback was from discussions about the data, about the direction the research should follow and the ways in which the information could be presented to the consultants.

The consultants were positive about the research and the key messages that are emerging from the research. There was a good discussion sparked from the differences between condition score 2 and condition score 3 ewes. The consultants thought that the lifetimewool condition targets would be a good guide for producers;

“There has been a culture to let targets go down low. We need to get away from that culture. This project is all about getting that target back up to an optimum level.”

All of the consultants agreed that at Christmas ewes were nearly always going to be in condition score 3+. They agreed that it is what happens after this that determines what condition the ewes will be in during pregnancy and lactation. By feeding small amounts early ewes would not need so much attention later on;

“A light ewe at joining is a light ewe at lambing.”

As part of the results the consultants wanted to know the implications of having ewes in different condition;

“It would be good to see the optimum ewe live weight and condition score targets for different environments.”

One consultant took the discussion further by suggesting that an optimum could be found in a well managed system;

“The optimum is probably between 2 and 3. The system should be more finely tuned than having a score of 2 or 3.”

The consultants were confident that the information provided would induce a change in farm practice;

“There will be a cultural change to feed through pregnancy. There is some terrific material here, along with other material to rewrite PROGRAZE.”

3.4 Providing the consultants with information

The consultants were very keen to use the information from the project. The consultants wanted some freedom to take the results and make their own analysis of the key messages;

“AWI has invested \$6.4 million. You cannot just sit on a hatchet.”

The lifetimewool team agreed that information should be given to the consultants as early as possible. There was a trust between the consultants and the researchers that the consultants would do the right thing. The consultants said they were all loyal to the project.

There were different preferences for the way that they preferred to be given information. One consultant did not want any information unless it was scientifically analysed and peer reviewed. The others wanted to be updated monthly so they could make their own decision about which information they would use.

This is a real positive outcome from the meeting because there is a real problem with the project in Victoria at the moment. The project dedicated 45 days to the communication of the project in 2004 and that has blown out to 135 days. This time could be better used for the research component of the project. If the communication of the project was done by consultants rather than the researchers then the project would benefit.

The conclusion was to have a balance between printed media and face to face contact. A generic CD that covers the key types of the project could be used or monthly emails outlining recent findings could be used.

Otherwise, meetings like this pilot meeting could be used. One consultant said that he would travel 150 km to have a meeting like the one held tonight.

3.5 Consultant Survey

The lifetimewool Project team want to understand consultant's knowledge and practice with regard to the management of ewe nutrition. Part of this was done using a consultant phone survey that was done by the consultancy company Clear Horizons and included 26 private consultants.

The survey found that there were some negative opinions about the project. These included;

Anticipated difficulty in disseminating messages

There was a need for the results to have some economic analysis regarding increased feeding and management of ewes.

The lifetimewool Research would just confirm what farmers already knew, or that it was reconfirming old research findings.

Applicability of findings Anticipated difficulty in disseminating messages

The work is only applicable to Western Victoria.

The consultants disregarded the comment about the research not being new. The consultants had not seen anything done on ewe nutrition at a paddock scale before.

“The only science or literature about this type of work is at the extremes, e.g. ultra thin or ultra fat, or was done in animal houses. There is nothing on a paddock scale like what you are doing.”

The idea of linking ewe management to the different pasture treatments is one area that the consultants thought was fresh and new;

“The work is not new but it is done with a new concept and package. For example, using FOO levels and comparing 800 to 1400, no one has been able to say it before, now here it is which means that this is new work. Farmers should be preparing for it. We need to talk with farmers about how often we have 800 or 1400 and then how do we understand these differences in terms of how we need to look after ewes.”

The consultants thought that a lot of the information could replace PROGRAZE, which is contradictory to the feedback that the findings would be hard to apply and there will be difficulty in disseminating the messages.

“Nothing like this is in PROGRAZE, and if PROGRAZE was the most up to date then now it is out of date which make this new work.”

“A 2-3 day course would be very sensible and could be incorporated to PROGRAZE.”

“The work is looking at the responsiveness to different areas to silent critics that say it is only relevant to areas.”

Everyone agreed that the project does lack some solid economic analysis. One suggestion was that the researchers would start the economic analysis and then the consultants can redo the analysis the way they want to. The consultants suggested that an outside economist could be useful to get a good analysis of the data.

This is because a lot of consultants already have their own methods for doing economic analyses. The consultants were happy that we were using GRASSGROW because of its solid biology and MIDAS for its optimisation capabilities.

3.6 Improvements to the research

There are some improvements that the consultants wanted to see in the project. One consultant wanted to see the effects of parasites between different treatment groups. Another consultant wanted to see more information on genotype versus condition score versus bodyweight.

There was a request from the Glenthompson Bestwool group about lamb survival. They want to know what they can do through nutrition so their lambs are not wiped out. David Robertson said he has seen benefits from following the lifetimewool Guidelines;

“Lambs will survive and be more productive at the same time” Robo

[When asked if he had changed what he does because of lifetimewool]

“Yes massively. I am always trying to fix little things. My farm is like a jig-saw puzzle and I am trying to fit it all into a bigger picture. lifetimewool is helping me do that.”

The type of information the consultants want from the second years data are;

Reproduction,

lamb survival,

progeny wool,
weaner survival and
update sheep weights

3.7 Conclusion

The consultants that attended the workshop in Hamilton were satisfied with the results from the project so far and the discussions indicated that the consultants would like to be more involved in the project. The consultants thought that the work was new and one consultant thought that the information would be ideal to update PROGRAZE.

The consultants thought that the ewe condition score targets were a great part of the results and farmers would benefit greatly from following an optimum liveweight or condition score profile.

The consultants were keen to get some more information and wanted the opportunity to make the information their own. They would like to be kept informed through printed media, CD's or emails on regular basis. Some consultants would like face to face contact.

The information that the consultants were interested in the most was;

Reproduction,
lamb survival,
progeny wool,
weaner survival and
update sheep weights

Appendix A: Email survey of Wool Extension Officers

Survey: Wool Extension Officers

1. Briefly describe your position and main duties, and the services you provide to sheep producers:

2. Are you involved with any wool producer groups or initiatives?

Please name any groups you are involved with and briefly describe the activities:

3. Have you heard of the lifetimewool project? (Yes or No)

If your answer is No, please go to question 10

4. Briefly describe your involvement with the Lifetime wool project:

5. What is your understanding of the key messages promoted by this project?

6. What is your opinion of these key messages?

7. Have lifetimewool's key messages influenced your approach to advising sheep producers on any aspect related to ewe nutrition?

(Yes/No)

If your answer is No, please go to question 10

8. What were your general recommendations on feeding ewes during pregnancy and lactation **before** you were influenced by lifetimewool's key messages?

9. Describe how your approach or recommendations changed as a result of lifetimewool's key messages.

10. In your experience with sheep producers, generally, what are the most common approaches to feeding ewe flocks?

11. In your experience with sheep producers, what are the most common approaches to monitoring and assessing ewe condition throughout the year?

12. In your experience with sheep producers, what are producers' most common problems with feeding ewes?

13. Describe your general recommendations to sheep producers on feeding ewes?

14. Describe your general recommendations to producers regarding ewe nutrition during pregnancy and lactation?

15. Do you advise sheep producers on any aspect of monitoring or assessment of ewe condition during pregnancy and lactation? *Explain briefly.*

16. With regard to feeding ewes, do you supply reference materials to sheep producers or refer them to other information providers? Please describe:

17. With regard to ewe nutrition and condition during pregnancy and lactation, what are your opinions about the potential effects on fibre diameter in ewes?

18. With regard to ewe nutrition and condition during pregnancy and lactation, what are your opinions about the potential effects on fibre diameter in progeny?

19. With regard to ewe nutrition and condition during pregnancy and lactation, what are your opinions about the potential effects on ewe fleece weights?

20. With regard to ewe nutrition and condition during pregnancy and lactation, what are your opinions about the potential effects on fleece weights in the progeny?

21. Would you be interested in becoming more involved in the Lifetime wool project?

(Yes/No)

22. Would you be interested in participating in lifetimewool project visits, newsletters or field days?

(Yes/No)

23. How would you prefer us to communicate with you (e.g. email, telephone, mail, newsletter)?

24. Thank you for participating in this survey. Is there anything you would like to comment on we with regard to any aspect of this survey or Lifetime wool?