

# ***Lifetime Wool* - Farmers' attitudes affect their adoption of recommended ewe management**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Lifetime Wool* Project is developing guidelines for the management of the nutrition of ewes to meet production targets. In the past, adoption of new pasture and livestock assessment skills in Australia has been low. However, a study of farmers attending *Lifetime Wool* workshops or involved in the paddock-scale research sites strongly suggests that some farmers are already making significant changes in response to *Lifetime Wool* messages. Further, the studies suggest that the farmers most likely to change can be identified by their attitude to risk and willingness to change. A national telephone survey has been developed to assess the proportion of wool producers with these attitudes, and their distribution across southern Australia. This information is thought to be critical for the design and successful delivery of the extension activities scheduled to start in 2006-7.

## **AIMS**

Pasture and livestock assessment skills can be used to improve the management of grazing systems, but their adoption is low (1). The adoption of new innovations is influenced by a farmer's attitude towards risk and change (3). The individual characteristics that influence the rate that farmers will adopt new innovations can be used to define/segment the target audience (2) for extension messages. Segmentation of the audience may allow more efficient and effective communication of new innovations because extension messages can be tailored to the different target groups (2).

This paper explores the evaluation process used in *Lifetime Wool* (LTW) to define the different levels of current practice with respect to the management of ewes. In addition, the paper explores the critical characteristics of farmers who are more likely to change practice in response to LTW messages.

## **METHOD**

The LTW project aims to provide new guidelines for ewe and pasture management to allow wool producers to achieve production targets. However, in light of the low rate of adoption of this type of innovation in the past, the project also aims to evaluate how successful the new guidelines are at stimulating change and willingness to change among wool producers in southern Australia. Hence, workshops were held in Victoria (n = 7), Western Australia (n = 5) and South Australia (n=1) with 209 farmers to document the range of methods used by farmers to monitor their pastures and ewes during the year. In addition, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were done with the 12 farmers who have hosted the plot or paddock-scale experiments on their properties (five in Victoria, six in Western Australia and one in South Australia). The aim of the in-depth interviews was to document the knowledge, attitudes and aspirations of this segment of farmers as well as any changes they had made as a result of becoming involved in the project. It was assumed that these farmers represented the main target audience for future LTW messages because they had already shown a keen interest and willingness to co-invest in the project.

The results from the workshops were used to define a global assessment scale of levels, or 'platforms', that displayed the range of livestock and pasture assessment skills used by farmers. The results of the in-depth interviews were used to position the farmers on the management platforms and document the changes made between platforms.

## **RESULTS**

Only 5% of the 209 farmers surveyed at the LTW workshops condition scored or weighed their ewes at joining, lambing and weaning with a view to achieving production targets. A further 35% condition scored their ewes opportunistically when they were in the yards. The other 60% assessed their ewes visually. The range of ewe monitoring practices was used to build the global assessment scale shown as levels or platforms in Table 1.

**Table 1: The 4 levels or platforms of current practice with respect to the management of ewes defined by surveys completed by 209 attendees at Lifetime Wool (LTW) workshops. 'A' represents**

**the level of practice of the 12 LTW collaborators before they became involved in the project and 'B' shows the level of practice after exposure to the results of LTW experimentation. 'n' indicates the number of collaborators involved in each change.**

Practice level	Approach to monitoring ewes	Changes in practice
A	Visual assessments in paddocks.	A
A	Visual assessments in paddock and condition score or weight when they are in the yards.	A
Level III	Formally condition score and manage joining	B
Level IV	Formally condition score or manage for joining	B

Transitions: A to B (n=3), A to B (n=7), A to B (n=5), A to B (n=7), B to B (n=7)

Table 1 shows that eight out of 12 farmer collaborators changed their ewe monitoring practice after becoming involved in LTW. These farmers are now monitoring ewes at a level recommended by the project (level III and IV). Three of the four farmers that were at level I remained at level I.

The in-depth interviews revealed three broad categories of attitudes in the LTW collaborators. The first category included farmers who were 'risk adverse and conservative'. These collaborators thought that the research done on their property did not represent commercial reality. They also tended to be those that did not change practice and remained at level I. The second category included farmers willing to take a 'calculated risk'. They were positive about the project's message but wanted to see more results such as economic analysis before making any changes. The third category comprised risk-takers who believed in the messages so far and were willing to change based on the results they'd seen on their property. The collaborators that changed the way they monitor their ewes tended to be in the risk-taker and calculated-risk-taker categories.

## CONCLUSION

This study of farmers attending LTW workshops or involved in the paddock-scale research sites strongly suggests that some farmers are already making significant changes in response to LTW messages. Further, the studies suggest that the farmers most likely to change can be identified by their attitude to risk and willingness to change. A national telephone survey has been developed to assess the proportion of wool producers with these attitudes and their distribution across southern Australia.

## KEY WORDS

Farmer attitudes, livestock and pasture management, audience segmentation, Lifetime Wool

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