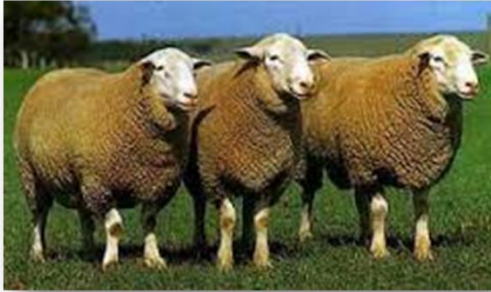# Ram Selection – getting the right genetics!

Murray Long – Clearview Consultancy (Farmlink Link Newsletter)

The time is fast approaching when sheep producers make the annual 'trek' to their ram supplier and select replacement sires for their sheep operation. The decision as to which ram breeder they source rams from will be based on a variety of reasons;

- A family tradition built up over many generations of sourcing genetics from a specific breeder
- A desire to focus on specific traits that a particular stud has built into their breeding program
- The breeder is just a few kilometres up the road
- The breeder does well at the major shows therefore his sheep must be good
- The desire to source the best genetics available based on performance
- The rams are the cheapest I can find
- A desire to remain on a 'bloodline' that has been proven to provide good returns

There are no doubt many more reasons why sheep producers make decisions as to where to source their rams, some have a great deal of merit, some have absolutely no justification. Rams make up only 2% of your total flock but their impact on the profitability of your enterprise is highly significant and in a self-replacing flock can have long term implications.

The decision as to where and how to source replacement rams is entirely the choice of individual producers but there are currently technologies to ensure the choices made are going to actually improve your profitability, not constrain you progress. The days of selecting rams visually with no information of how those rams are actually going to perform on your property are long gone. The entire livestock industry now has fully accepted the use of Estimated Breeding Values (EBV's) as a means of determining the genetic potential of individual sires and just how they will impact on profitability.

The sheep industry in Australia has developed Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBV's) that provide independent analysis across a wide range of traits in Merinos, Terminals and Maternals on the genetic potential of individual animals. Sheep producers can use these values to tailor selections to suit their operation but first they must develop their own breeding objectives.

Prior to making a decision as to where to source rams, firstly determine whether the ram breeder provides the opportunity to make selections based on performance (ASBV's) or just visual appraisal. If you are satisfied with visual appraisal, no more homework is required, but if you have access to ASBV's, you can develop your own breeding objective.

Your breeding objective should focus on the main areas of production that ensure your profitability. If breeding self-replacing Merinos, fleece weight, staple strength and fertility may be the top considerations. If your operation focuses on prime lambs, early growth, birth weight and muscle may be of most importance. Whatever you decide, try not to select any more than 3 or 4 main traits otherwise the task becomes very confusing and little progress will be made.

Once you have a breeding objective that is specific to your operation, you can select rams with the exact ASBV's to match those breeding objectives, something that is virtually impossible by visual selection or without the use of ASBV's.

Buy selecting replacement sires using ASBV's you achieve several outcomes;

- The progeny will be more even and achieve all the objectives of your breeding program
- The rams you purchase from one year to the next are of equal or better quality
- You can be confident you are getting the right genetics for your operation

It is important to remember that when buying a team of replacement sires, it is the average genetic merit of the whole team that is important, not just the inclusion of a few rams that are ideal. By focussing heavily on those traits that are at the top of your breeding objectives and being mindful of other traits that could provide problems (eg fibre diameter or worm resistance), you can be confident that every ram you buy will work toward improving you profitability.

The range of traits evaluated in either MerinoSelect or Lambplan is extensive and all are calculated independently and in most cases across flocks so you are able to compare the values from one stud to the next. For example, this allows for a direct comparison between a White Suffolk ram in NSW and a Poll Dorset ram in Vic or WA, or in the case of a Merino ram, a comparison between any rams across the breed. The MerinoSelect and Lambplan data is analysed separately so comparison between them is not valid for any trait.

To find out more about how you can use ASBV's to assist in your selection decisions, vist the Sheep Genetics website http://www.sheepgenetics.org.au

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