



Client Newsletter

“The Best Year in Five”

That is the opinion of two marketers of New Zealand lamb, about the season ahead. “The stars are lining up”.

When you are at the top of a business cycle it is hard to see the bottom, and when you are at the bottom, it is hard to see the top.

I have just returned from a week in the prime lamb area of western Victoria, Australia. Sheep farmers there have been given a “pizzling” by the drought, losing an average of \$53,000 for the financial year. Half the lambs were finished on grain through the drought. Grain saved the sheep market from a total disaster. One New Zealander farming there told us that grain has a number of advantages over irrigation.

Australian farmers are resilient people, but so are their New Zealand counterparts.

The importance of early spring feeding

The dairy industry has defined much more exactly the value of feeding well in early lactation. The gain that can be made from fully feeding in the first two months of lactation, is to lift seasonal production from 320 to 440kg milksolids per cow.

The parallel with sheep is not exact because of the difference in lactation length, three months versus nine or ten. But good ewe condition and tapping into optimum lactation potential delivers good lambs and ewes at weaning, and the virtuous cycle continues.

A plug for Nitrogen

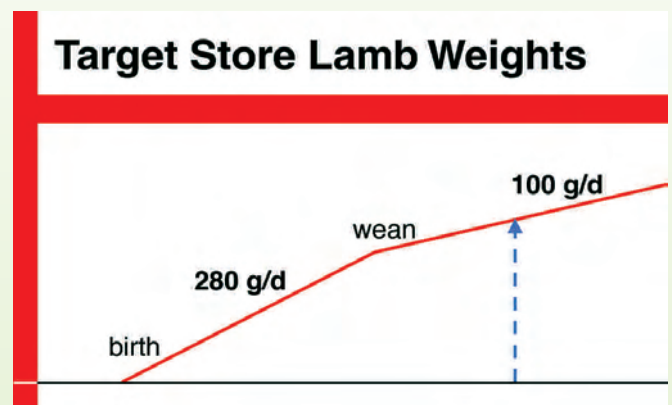
Nitrogen fertiliser is still the cheapest form of supplementary feed. We applied nitrogen at Wairere (37kg) and White Rock (24kg) in April, before the price rises, admittedly. Though there was not enough moisture in the ground until late June to really capitalise on the

nitrogen, the pasture on both properties still made substantial extra growth relative to neighbours. That momentum in pasture growth has continued, and will enable us to go into lambing with normal feed covers and ewes and hoggets at normal liveweights.

At Wairere we have 1900 Romney ewe hoggets in lamb and the ewes have scanned 172% without triplets.

Finish lambs faster

The key to breeding or buying lambs which finish quickly is to deal only with those which have grown at 280g/day or better in early life. This benchmark was developed by Bruce Farquharson and some farmer clients in Australia.



When buying random lines of lambs at saleyards, these farmers observed that only 75% finished to the desired weight and specification in the desired time. It was better business to buy privately, after calculating a cut off liveweight. This lifted the strike rate to 95% of lambs finished in the desired time.

Desirable lambs

The Alliance company is targeting the lambs which yield well on their Viascan machines. At a recent supplier meeting, company representatives talked about the type of lamb which score well – “Texel cross, Waireres and one or two other groups”.

After six years of the Alliance CPT (Central Progeny Test) trial, Wairere sire 2165/97 is ranked second for growth among the dual purpose rams tested, behind an East Friesian ram.

Parasite resilience trial

After six years of trial work with Ag Research with members of the Wairarapa Romney Improvement group and Auckland Romney Development Group, it is pleasing to have a big representation of Wairere rams in the top group of the WRIG sires used 2001 to 2006: the first, third and fifth ranked rams for resilience.

This sort of work does not come without a cost. When the trial terminated in late March, the autumn drought was taking hold. We did not have the quality of pasture to help lambs which had taken a knock from worms. And our standard procedure of rotating the recorded ram lambs in a mob of nineteen hundred around hill paddocks is not the best way to look after their welfare. But it does sort out those which can take the pressure. Ram clients need to realise that pushing the boundaries of resilience and constitution runs counter to having the best grown two tooth rams in November.

What do you really want?

DNA profiles – How good are they?

It seems that DNA gene marker technology grabs all the headlines. But how good are these tests?

The Footrot Resilience test was developed at Lincoln University, initially for Merino and mid micron sheep. To verify the test, AgResearch sent the original trial data to three quantitative geneticists around the world. Two could see no pattern and one could discern a weak pattern at the bottom end. AgResearch is in the process of revalidating these markers.

I, and several other rambreeders who have used the test, think that foot shape and pasterns are the most important determinants of good feet for a lifetime. There are very few Wairere Romneys which measure other than 1, 2, or 3 out of the Footrot Resilience score to 5 anyway.

The Cold Tolerance test was also developed by Lincoln, to help survival of newborn Merino lambs. Last spring, a trial was conducted to compare a number of Romney sires. The weather was good over lambing, but there was still a big difference between the best (2% lambs lost) and worst (20% lambs lost) rams. However, only 10-15% of this difference could be explained by the cold tolerance test. Interestingly, most lamb deaths happened on frosty mornings from body chill.

The Myomax test is relevant only to Texel genes. Most Texels have the Myomax gene, and many have a double copy. In the testing we have done, around 90% of Texel Romneys have had Myomax and 64% of seventy quarter-Texels (Multiplier rams) which we tested. With this test costing \$150 per sheep, we are reluctant to take on this cost unless the ram client is prepared to front up with the extra cash.

The Parasite Resistance test is soon to be released. As described, this gene marker will distinguish individuals which have 20% lower FEC (faecal egg count). Is that enough to get excited about?

The Wairarapa Romney Improvement Group growth rate flock sires include quite a number with double star status for good resistance. One could conclude that breeding for fast growth has also selected rams which have good resistance or resilience.

Taking a sceptical view, Catapult has a vested interest in trying to convert rambreeders to adopt the DNA parentage test at \$20 per ewe or lamb. Wairere would need to charge an extra \$200-300 per ram sold to cover this cost. At present, the quality of extra information gained does not justify the extra cost.

How tough are Perendales?

Two years ago a client asked us to breed some Finn-Texel Perendales. We sourced 350 five year Perendales



Right: Wairere stud ewes and lambs

was a lambing of 105%, compared to the five thousand Romney ewes weaning 150%.

Oz Lamb Shanks

Last month some Hawkes Bay farmers got upset about Australian sheep meat appearing in New Zealand supermarkets. They have missed the point. What the Australian company has done is to convert a piece of red meat from the meat counter into a meal solution in the ready meal section. A gap in the New Zealand market has been revealed. We should rejoice that there is unrealised extra value in lamb shanks. Future increases in value at the farm gate will be enhanced by changing product form into meal solutions rather than continuing with the “same old” cuts in the meat counter.

Lessons from the All Blacks

Some years ago when Graham Mourie became the coach of the Hurricanes, he introduced a system of self monitoring. Each player was asked to write down the attributes he thought were needed to be (eg) a top hooker. He was then asked to score himself on those attributes, every week. An attitude of seeking continuous improvement was required. Some players thought the system sucked and left. Those that stayed and accepted the discipline of self monitoring and continuous improvement were responsible for taking the Hurricanes from the bottom to near the top of the Super 12 table. That same approach has been used by the All Blacks in recent years. Their playing record speaks for itself.



Costs, costs, costs

The spotlight is on costs in the sheepfarming sector. The biggies are labour, fertiliser and interest. We have the same issue with rambreeding. Labour and other recording costs have risen sharply in recent years. But two tooth ram prices have been constant since 2001.

Wairere Scholarships

In November 2006 the Wairere rambreeding group selected the first two Telford students for a Wairere scholarship. The successful candidates, Leighton Bambry from north Wairarapa and Hamish McKenzie from Dunedin, will begin a two year stint on Wairere rambreeding properties at the beginning of 2008.

A scholarship programme with Taratahi Agricultural Training College is planned also. We look forward to helping some bright young entrants to our sheep and beef industry.

South Island Fielddays 23 – 27 July

It was good to see so many clients and other interested farmers attend one of our days. It is important to stay positive when the chips are down. Those who have remained positive over the past twenty five years are the ones who have forged ahead.

Michael Northcote, near Waiau, has had only three intakes of Wairere rams, but has been pleased with the fast growth rate of the half Wairere progeny. The first lot of two tooth ewes has scanned well.

Hugh Northcote, Whalesback Station on the Inland Kaikoura road, has been using Wairere Midmicron (1/2 Dohne Merino 1/2 Romney) over his halfbred flock. It is early days yet, but the progeny have better feet, grow faster, have scanned ahead of other two toothed and have retained a midmicron wool type.

Don Hayes, who farms near Rakaia, told the audience that it is difficult to distinguish the truth from “porkies” when rambreeders describe the merits of their sheep. However, he has been delighted with the performance of Wairere Romneys on his dryland area. He bought in Wairere ewe lambs in 2005, sold the Corriedale flock and converted the irrigated part of the property to dairy support. The Wairere two toothed lambed 150% last year, and have scanned well again this year, without access to irrigated feed which used to help the Corriedale performance. “These Romneys perform in the dry, contrary to what farmers used to think”.

Tim Morrow, manager of Blue Cliffs Station, south of Timaru, has achieved a lot in his five years at Blue Cliffs. He bred the traditional Romney/East Friesian flock back



to modern performance bred Romneys. Productivity has soared, peaking at 155% from 8,000 ewes. Stocking rate has steadily been increased to 23,000 stock units, including the quarantine area of 3,000 stock units.

William Rolleston, part owner of Blue Cliffs, gave the audience a presentation on the serum business he and his brother John initiated twenty years ago. The serum collected from sheep and cattle is used for human medical purposes. The business has grown to 35 staff, and a new purpose built laboratory and office building near Timaru. This is creating value in a way that the New Zealand economy could emulate many times over.

William also mentioned an exporting programme to Japan, involving five lambs per week at \$180 net for each 17kg lamb. He said those niches are there, but supplying year round is not as easy as it sounds.

Brendan Lawlor, near Clinton, has used Wairere rams for 22 years. From the mid 1980's, when debt servicing at 55% of gross income dictated a survival approach to farming, Brendan has continued his policy of easycare sheepfarming. This approach has allowed impressive business growth to 23,000 stock units. Despite easycare, the ewes lamb at 130-150%, the hoggets make a big contribution to lamb numbers, and the "Waireres have that ability to bounce back fast after a hard time". Sale of surplus ewe lambs has created extra profit over the years.

Fergus Templeton, near the Southland coast at Tokanui, achieves impressive results, 155% plus from ewes, and 90% plus from ewe hoggets. Fast growth rate delivers heavy lambs to the works early, making room for trading lambs from January on. "Quick turnaround" trading lambs and cattle are the bonus for having a highly productive ewe flock.

Near miss

Congratulations to Ken McRae, South Otago who came second in the Otago-Southland Romney ewe hogget competition, by the narrowest of margins (to Wairere client John Chittock). Ken's flock tailed 151%, despite losing 6% to Salmonella brandenberg. Lamb carcass weight averaged 17.4kg, with 65% gone by end of January. The farm produced 338kg of meat and wool per hectare, though only 55% of the land is cultivatable. Ken's ewes weigh 70 to 75kg, but the good size and condition of ewes translates into fast growing lambs, and early unloading.

Thank you for your support, and we wish you well for a better year ahead.

Warm Regards

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