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Producers can double lambing rates says Scholar

Producers should focus on fertility to make the most of the ideal conditions Australia provides for raising sheep says NSW Nuffield Scholar Julie Brien.

By Catherine Norwood

Australian sheep producers should aim for lambing rates well above 100 per cent, and a target of 200 per cent is achievable, according to NSW Nuffield Scholar Julie Brien. This is more than double the current average lambing rates.

After travelling through the world's major sheep producing nations, including New Zealand, the US, United Kingdom, South Africa and Argentina, Ms Brien says she now realises how well-suited Australia is to sheep production. Her scholarship was sponsored by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA).

"In countries like Argentina and South Africa, the environmental conditions restrict production far more severely than conditions in Australia. They have major predators that we don't have, such as pumas and jackals, and many of their grasses have limited nutritional value.

"In places like Patagonia, in southern Argentina, where the latitude below is below that of Tasmania, they can lose their whole flock – even the adult sheep – every five years or so because of bad weather," she says.

The environmental challenges producers face in these other countries have forced them to focus on maximising production from their ewes in a way that many Australia producers have not had to.

Ms Brien says the issue that is bringing fertility into focus in Australia is competition from other farming enterprises. Many farmers have moved away from livestock because of falling returns and difficulties finding staff in recent years – other enterprises have proven more profitable.

If remaining Australia producers could capitalise on fertility and increase their lambing rates just 10 per cent, it would improve their profitability and make their livestock enterprises more competitive. She says the easiest way to do achieve this is with targeted culling.

"I saw figures recently that suggested current Australian lambing rates, at weaning are 75 per cent for wool lambs and 90 per cent for prime lambs. Given all the advantages Australia has, we should be doing much better than that."

"Higher lambing rates and improved lamb survival will help produce either more lambs from the same number of ewes, or allow farmers to reduce the size of the flock and maintain output," she says.

"The research I've seen overseas has made me realise that, biologically, sheep can readily produce twins and triplets, unlike cattle, which can have real difficulty physically carrying twins to term." She found several sheep breeds in the United Kingdom with lambing rates of 170 per cent, increasing to more than 200 per cent where feed was not a limiting factor.

Ms Brien is stock manager for her family's farm business based near Cowra in NSW and is already achieving lambing rates of close to 150 per cent, after breeding for increased fertility for the past five

years. This includes the use of a composite Coopworth maternal bloodline incorporating the Booroola gene to increase ovulation.

The Briens run up to 2000 ewes. Ms Brien says pregnancy scans this year indicate a lambing rate of 184 per cent, including 100 ewes pregnant with triplets.

“If anything I’ve become even tougher on the livestock since my travels. If ewes don’t consistently produce lambs, and raise them, they are culled.”

Ms Brien says the livestock industry outlook is bright, with a rising demand for protein worldwide. While in the US she visited MLA offices, and staff told her they couldn’t meet the current US demand for lamb.

Australia and New Zealand are the two main export countries but they target different markets. New Zealand produces smaller lambs, sold as a full carcase, up to 20kg. Australian lambs are bigger, usually 23-30kg dressed, and can be sold as pre-cut and packaged meat, rather than as carcasses.

Ms Brien says management, not the environment, is the main factor limiting production in Australia, including the management of nutrition.

“I picked up a few strategies from overseas, but even the Australian Evergraze project shows that putting ewes on green feed the week before joining can significantly increase joining rates. Getting more ewes in lamb and increasing lambing rates are the cheapest and simplest ways to increase profitability,” she says.

For more information contact Julie Brien, 02 6343 6274, mobile 0428 436 274, email juliebrien@activ8.net.au.

PHOTOGRAPH

High-resolution photographs of Ms Brien can be downloaded from www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php.

Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, cnorwood@coretext.com.au if you have any problems accessing images.

Captions:

Nuffield Scholar Julie Brien believes Australia producers could double their lambing rates by focusing more closely on ewe fertility.

NSW Nuffield Scholar Julie Brien checks out a Merino in Machinchoa, Argentina, as part of her investigations into improving ewe fertility and lamb survival rates.

Applications open for 2011 Scholarships

Applications are now open for Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarships for travel in 2011 and will close on 30 June, 2010. Winners will be announced in October 2010. Scholarships are for primary producers aged 28 to 40 years, although applications outside this range may be considered.

Each scholarship is valued at \$28,000, sponsored by major agribusiness and industry groups across Australia. All scholars take part in a six week Global Focus Program, with up to 10 weeks of individual travel to investigate a topic of their choice.

Scholars say it has been a life changing experience, building self-confidence and decision-making skills and introducing them to a network of leading primary producers and agricultural leaders around the world.

Nuffield Australia chairman David Brownhill says personal growth is a huge benefit of the program. Its primary aim is to improve the skills of Australian primary producers, provide a global perspective of agriculture and help scholars bring back new ideas and strategies for the benefit of both individual scholars, and their respective industries.

Recent scholars have been drawn from a wide pool of primary industries and include grain and rice growers, fishers and aquaculturists, chicken, beef, lamb, goat and pork producers, woolgrowers, dairy farmers, apiarists, orchardists, horticulturalists and vigneron. Study topics have varied from the basics of production such as soil, water, crop varieties, weeds and disease to production systems, new technologies, natural resource management, biofuels, carbon trading, supply systems, marketing and public relations.

Scholars are selected for their farming and leadership capabilities, and potential to make a valuable contribution to the future of Australian agriculture. They join a growing international network of scholars, which has more than 200 members in Australia and 1300 members worldwide.

Application forms are available from Nuffield Australia on 03 5480 0755, via email, enquiries@nuffield.com.au, or from the website www.nuffield.com.au.

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