

Getting back into sheep? Aim for simplicity, efficiency and profit

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Mixed farming has many benefits, with risk reduction and income diversity well to the fore, but running sheep in conjunction with an intensive cropping program brings significant challenges. This article looks at some of the issues facing continuous croppers thinking about 'getting back into sheep'.

A sheep enterprise needs to be simple, efficient and generate a good return, according to Brian 'Smokey' Ashton.

"Sheep enterprises don't need to be complex but they do need to be well managed, and profitable, and that requires good planning and taking control from the outset," he said. "It's no good going into it in a half-hearted way".

Brian identifies knowledge, skills, planning, decision-making and management as key issues for anyone thinking of 'getting back into sheep'.

"The key to success with sheep, as with cropping, is to do the job properly and not 'dabble' or think they will run themselves. Sheep need to be managed too, so it is important to plan well ahead and prioritise so neither the cropping nor sheep program suffers at the expense of the other.

"Sit down and think through what is needed to make a success of the sheep as well as the cropping.

"Integrate the two enterprises as much as possible, but aim to separate the peak pressure times. If you are running a breeding program you might be able to change the mating time so lambing is further away from seeding, which might also open the way to use grain crops as grazing for the ewes around lambing.

"Plan ahead, and once you have a plan be proactive and tackle things before they need to be done so you keep ahead of the game.

"Good planning and good management is the way to stay in control."

San Jolly, director of Productive Nutrition, agrees that planning is the starting point, with a detailed assessment of the most profitable sheep business to run on the property an important part of that because there are considerable differences between properties.

"The sheep program, including when to buy and when to sell if it is a trading enterprise, needs to be an integral part of



GROWERS WHO DECIDE TO RUN A BREEDING ENTERPRISE NEED TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF FEED SUPPLY FOR THEIR STOCK WHEN CROPPING PADDOCKS ARE UNAVAILABLE FOR GRAZING.

the annual planning process and receive as much attention as the cropping program."

Brian, who runs Pt Lincoln-based Sheep Consultancy Service, suggests that anyone thinking of running sheep in parallel with their cropping program allocate time to think through how the stock enterprise will best fit with their cropping program, identify the issues they need to address and research the available options before deciding on the way forward.

He sees loss of sheep handling and management skills as a major issue for the industry and advocates that a grower who decides to run sheep with his or her cropping program establish a relationship with a good livestock consultant.

"It'll cost you money, but the knowledge you gain is worth it. A consultant is a source of experience and can provide information about the latest developments in everything from stock handling equipment to grazing management.

"Most growers use an agronomist and it makes sense to get the same level of input on the sheep side, particularly for a farmer who doesn't have a lot of recent experience with handling and managing stock.

"You need someone who can not only provide good information and guide you but who will serve as a sounding board; someone you can bounce ideas off."

Decisions to be made about a sheep program include whether it should be a breeding or trading enterprise, the breed of sheep to run and what market to produce for, Brian said.

Production options include breeding and growing out ewes for sale as breeders, producing lambs for breeding, breeding cross-bred lambs for 'finishing' by other operators, breeding and 'finishing' cross-bred lambs and trading – buying in lambs or older sheep to finish for the meat market or sell on to finishers.

“The challenge is to identify a sheep enterprise that suits you, fits with the cropping program, can be managed with the resources available and is profitable. It needs to be efficient and make money or there is no point in having it.

“The keys to success are to have clear management and production objectives and a simple, robust system that will enable you to profitably meet those objectives and monitor the program and its profitability.

“Focus your effort and available dollars on developing a good livestock system that matches and fits well with your cropping program.”

That includes addressing the labour needs.

OJD is governed by strict rules that vary from State to State and South Australia has just changed its OJD regulations.

“Sheep can be labour-intensive so you need to structure the livestock enterprise to minimise the labour requirements and plan the sheep and cropping enterprises so the peak labour requirements of the two enterprises conflict as little as possible.

“This needs to be part of the annual planning process. Look at the year ahead, identify the labour needs and when the peaks occur and allocate the available resources to where they are needed.

“If you don’t have enough time, consider using casual labour.

“It can help to plan sheep operations so they are grouped together and can be done at the same time. This can significantly increase efficiency and, if you are hiring labour, mean you can offer a worker blocks of several weeks at a time, but only need him two or three times a year.”

Growers who decide to run a breeding enterprise will need to address the issue of feed supply for the stock when cropping paddocks are unavailable for grazing during winter and spring, Brian said.

The traditional way of meeting this need in many SA districts is to have some paddocks under annual pasture – usually medic or clover, depending on rainfall and soil type – each year.

A ‘year in, year out’ rotation of alternating

DON'T BE SCARED OFF BY INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

Infrastructure, or the cost of renewing or establishing it, is often seen as a reason for croppers not to return to mixed farming.

However, sheep infrastructure need not be costly and there is always a solution to an infrastructure issue, even the need for a shearing shed, according to consultant Brian ‘Smokey’ Ashton.

“Don’t be scared off by infrastructure. It may not cost a fortune, particularly if you’ve only been out of sheep for a few years.

“Think through the issues, work out the questions you need to ask and get the right advice. There is almost always more than one option, so it pays to find someone who can give you an overview of all the available options. Reliable sources of good current information include livestock consultants, stock agents, contractors and manufacturers of stock handling equipment and stockyards.

“Good stock-handling facilities such as good yards, the right handling equipment such as crutching cradles and raceways to help control stock movement when changing paddocks can save a lot of time and effort.”

San Jolly, principal of Productive Nutrition, sees a good set of sheep yards as a priority.

Lack of a shearing shed is often seen as a major issue, but San points out that the need for a shearing shed will depend on the enterprise. If sheep are being traded in and out of stubbles they can be bought off-shears and sold in wool, or there may be an option to use a neighbour’s shed.

“If you are selling Merino or cross-bred lambs the wool is likely to be more valuable on the animals than in the bale, but if ewes are being traded the fleece becomes a valuable component of the total sheep gross margin, so shearing should be considered.

“If you are planning to shear as part of the sheep program you will need to have access to an operational shearing shed, and if there isn’t one on your property it is definitely worth discussing the possibility of using a neighbour’s shed.”

Running a breed such as Dorpers or Wiltshires, which shed their wool, eliminates the need for shearing.

Sheep need to have access to water of reasonable quality, with water cleanliness and a flow rate sufficient to meet the needs of the number of animals in the paddock or feedlot important considerations, San said. “Young sheep require water with no more than 4,000 ppm salts but adult sheep will tolerate up to 7000 ppm without any reduction in productivity.”

Brian agrees. He suggests piping water to each paddock, but if sheep are to be run on only part of the property that may not be necessary. If you don’t have permanent troughs, water carts – tanks on trailers – and portable troughs can be used to provide stock water.

The critical issue is to ensure the flow rate is sufficient to ensure the sheep can always obtain water when they want it, he said.

Fencing can also be an issue. Boundary fences need to be checked and repaired or upgraded. If all or most internal fences have been removed to improve cropping efficiency, or if large paddocks need to be sub-divided into smaller units for grazing management, electric fencing is an option.

San agrees that electric fencing can be a useful management tool, but cautions that shifting electric fencing takes time and labour, and some growers are moving away from electric fencing because of the time required to set it up and shift it.

pasture and crop is the standard approach, but there are other options, with 'pasture phases' of two or three successive years of pasture alternating with cropping phases of one or more years of cereals providing greater disease break and weed control benefits in some situations than a 'year in, year out' system.

Another option is to take poorer, less profitable paddocks out of the cropping program and seed them to perennial pasture such as lucerne, or a mixture of perennial grasses and legumes, to establish a permanent fodder resource.

"The key to success with pastures is to find the right pasture plant or plants for the district and the particular soil and paddock conditions," Brian said.

"Pastures can also have significant benefits for a cropping program.

"The income generated from sheep is only part of the picture. Rotating legumes and cereals reduces risk and benefits the cropping program because the legumes fix nitrogen that becomes available to subsequent crops, can break the life cycle of cereal root diseases and provide an opportunity to use weed control mechanisms or chemicals that can't be used in the cropping phase.

"These benefits need to be taken into account when calculating the profitability of the livestock program."

Sheep can also generate a profit from



LEACHIM STUDMASTER ANDREW MICHAEL MANAGES HIS CROPPING PROGRAM TO FIT AROUND HIS SHEEP ENTERPRISE IN WHICH HE RUNS STUD AND COMMERCIAL POLL MERINOS AND WHITE SUFFOLKS ON THREE PROPERTIES.



BRIAN ASHTON DISCUSSING THE MERITS OF A SELECTION OF *SOUTHROSE* MERINO AND POLL MERINO RAMS WITH A GROUP OF CLIENTS.

non-arable country, with one model having breeding stock run on hill country for most of the year and brought back to the cropping paddocks only when feed is available.

Brian tends to favour the traditional model of a self-replacing Merino flock as the best sheep option for most growers because he sees the Merino enterprise as robust and reliable and there is a lot of knowledge available about how to get the best from them, but San suggests growers considering adding a sheep enterprise think seriously about trading sheep, provided they can do it well.

"Sheep are a great risk-management tool but it is important to realise that adding a breeding enterprise introduces a completely new business to the farm," she said. "Breeding sheep successfully requires organisational and management skills similar to those needed for successful cropping.

"If you don't want two full-time jobs, trading is the way to go because there are periods when there are no sheep on the property, which significantly reduces the amount of hands-on paddock and yard work needed for the sheep enterprise.

"With a trading enterprise the focus is on the market, not the sheep husbandry, although it is still important to keep the stock healthy and make sure they have enough feed.

"The simplest trading model is probably to buy older ewes off shears, fatten them on stubbles and put them back on the market at a heavier body weight, but there are many others including buying in pregnant ewes, lambing them down and selling off them and their progeny when they and the market are right.

Most growers use an agronomist and it makes sense to get the same level of input on the sheep side.

"Running a self-replacing flock and breeding and finishing your own lambs is always an option if you have the feed and labour necessary, or you can buy in replacement ewes instead of breeding them, so you only need terminal sires for the lamb production.

"Whether you decide to breed or buy in might depend on whether or not you have non-arable country where the breeders can be held during the cropping season. If you have a property spread over several blocks another option might be to dedicate one block entirely to stock and bring them onto the cropping blocks only when there is feed available, but if you have only good cropping country it is probably better to trade."

However, she cautions, trading is far from easy and operators need to be good at it to make it pay well.

“To make a success of trading you need to be in the market place early, usually before you want the stock on your property, to make sure you can buy at the right price, so you need to make sure you have somewhere to put sheep when they become available at the right price ahead of when you actually want them.”

Growers can monitor the market themselves if they have the time and expertise, San said, but developing a relationship with a good agent or an astute trader who will work for the producer's best interests will pay dividends.

“A good agent will follow the market trends, know where the sheep are, their breeding, how they have been managed and whether or not there are any specific health or biosecurity issues.

“You don't want to buy lambs that have been tight for feed pre-weaning, and bio-security issues such as the risk of introducing drench-resistant worms or Ovine Johne's Disease (OJD) are always a consideration.”

OJD is governed by strict rules that vary from State to State and South Australia has just changed its OJD regulations, San said. Anyone thinking about running sheep should familiarise themselves with the new regulations, which are set out on the web site www.ojd.com.au

“It is important to never assume sheep have been vaccinated, even if that is what the documentation says.

“Make it standard practice to vaccinate all stock against enterotoxigenicity (pulpy kidney) and associated conditions on arrival on the property and, particularly if they go straight into stubble or are fed a high-starch diet in a feed lot, repeat the process a month later.”

Other stock health issues to be aware of include lice, footrot and flies.

“Fly strike can be an issue and it pays to check how sheep you are buying have been treated and make sure you have the facilities to tackle a fly problem or have access to a reliable contractor if conditions require that,” San said.

“Worm issues are complicated by drench resistance, which a recent survey suggests is now widespread. If you have a clean property and bring in sheep infested with

drench-resistant worms, the life cycle of sheep worms means you will end up with chemical-resistant worms on your property.”

The latest information on management of lice, worms and blowfly risks in sheep can be accessed through the new www.paraboss.com.au web site.

While those issues are important, feed supply is critical.

The key to success with sheep, as with cropping, is to do the job properly and not 'dabble' or think they will run themselves.

“You have to have sufficient quality feed for the sheep you have, whether you are breeding lambs or buying stock in, but with careful planning sheep can be successfully integrated into cropping systems without adding the complexity of perennial pastures,” San said.

“A grower buying stock in spring will need sufficient feed to hold them for two or three months before stubble grazing becomes available; then how long they can stay in the crop paddocks will depend on the amount of nutrition in the stubbles.

“The challenge is to balance the amount and quality of feed available, the number


of sheep and the expected weight gain, and it may well be necessary to supplement the grazing with other feed to achieve the production objectives.

“Cereal or canola crops sown for grain production can be a valuable source of early-winter feed, but it is important to closely manage the grazing pressure on young crops and to have somewhere else to put the stock when they need to be removed so the crops can run up to head and set grain.”

Other management models include confining stock in small paddocks or feed lots when paddock space is not available; an approach that opens the way for value-adding feed grain grown on the property the previous season by using it as the base for the feed lot ration.

Balaklava growers Samuel and Michael Tiller, who returned to running sheep after a break of almost a decade, have developed a management system in which they lamb down their Merino ewes in a feedlot during seeding and use header chaff as the basis of the feedlot ration.

This minimises the labour required to manage lambing and makes profitable use of the header chaff, with the additional benefit of ensuring any weed seeds in the chaff stream are removed from the cropping paddocks.

They also run their sheep in their stubbles, using short periods of high grazing pressure to maximise grain cleanup while minimising the risk of the straw being trodden onto the soil surface. 



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