

Sheep project lifts performance

Key performance indicators Year 1 and Year 3 for Titirangi Station

	Key Performance Indicator	Year 1	Year 3
Ewe flock performance	Scanning performance (%)	135	142
	Lambing performance (%)	113	131
	kg lamb weaned/ewe mated	32	38
	Ave weaning weight (kg)	28	29
Ewe lamb replacements	Ave weight winter (kg)	39	41
	Two tooth mating weight (kg)	49	55
Post-weaning Sale lamb performance	Ave sale weight (kg)	26.7	33.4
	Ave days to sale (days)	104	95
	Ave growth rate (g/day)	6	46

Tolaga Bay station Titirangi triumphed in a project to improve sheep performance on the East Coast.

The Bernard Matthews Sheep-for-Profit project, which ran from November 2006 to 2009, came under the Tairāwhiti Land Development Trust umbrella.

Its objective was to find the factors limiting sheep performance, then make management changes to lift performance.

Don MacColl, of AgriNetworks in Te Awamutu, ran the project. It involved five large Māori-owned farms from throughout the East Coast, with five completing the three-year project. As his model he used an earlier Sheep for Profit project run by AgriNetworks across 47 farms which lifted sheep income and performance by \$12.37/ewe over three years.

Trust chief executive Chris Torrie says the project wasn't expensive at \$6000 a year for three years for each farm; the trust contribution was \$4500, with the balance paid by the farms.

The results proved a good return on investment for the five farms, with an average increase of \$13.30/ewe, a 26% lift in production over three years.

This is worth an extra \$111,700 in average sheep income per farm, the main driver of which was an extra 9.6kg of lamb liveweight sold per ewe averaged across the five farms. Wool sold per ewe fell by 0.16kg over the three years.

In comparison with this average, Titirangi had the greatest lift in income of \$21.73/ewe, an increase of nearly 42% in sheep income over the three years. This also included an extra 15.5kg of lamb liveweight sold per ewe.

This 950ha effective property began the project making \$38/ewe and ended up doing \$59/ewe, a move which has taken them from the bottom quarter of production to now close to average, MacColl says.

Using a base of 2005-06 prices, the value of the whole project was estimated at \$570,000, Torrie says. This was across a total of 42,000 ewes and just over 9300ha of effective farmland.

MacColl says the first year revolved around data collection. "We get the farmers to collect a lot of information such as liveweights, body condition scores, scanning and lambing results and lamb sale details."

He says this year can prove frustrating for some because little change is made to the farm business during this time.

"At the end of year one we do a basic audit to try and find out the limiting factors. Then we compare these farms with other farms, using the large Sheep for Profit database.

"The next step is to work through the opportunities for improvement, to start setting things like ewe target weights and to put plans in place."

A roster of group days involving all staff on each property allowed for everyone to understand the measurements recorded, and relate to the plans for improvement.

Staff training was an important part of the programme, with as many staff as possible learning how to condition-score sheep. Condition scoring is the best way you can determine how farmers are feeding their ewes, MacColl says.

None of the farms did any one magic thing to improve performance.

"The most common limiting factor was the high priority placed on generating income from selling lambs for processing at high carcass weights."

This had a negative effect on ewe flock performance, reflected by low reproductive performance and as a result, sub-optimal ewe mating weights and the depressed growth of ewe replacements.

They faced a few common issues on the East Coast with the summer dry conditions, facial eczema and poor fertility. The three-year period included two droughts, one of the reasons ewe numbers on each of the farms dropped by 8-9% over the three years.

"There were fewer ewes being carried but they were more productive," MacColl says.

"As a result of the programme some of the farms have changed the sheep genetics they use to obtain better tolerance to facial eczema. It's hard to measure the benefits of such moves in only a three-year programme, because it will take 10 to 15 years to get the new genetics right through a flock."

As the farmers improved pasture management, this also had an impact on the cattle side of their businesses, but these improvements were not measured in this project.

Torrie says the Bernard Matthews Sheep-for-Profit programme introduced disciplines of regular, timely and accurate recording which had benefits right across the farm. For example, on Titirangi there was a facial eczema problem, so the project set them up with a microscope and the skills to do pasture spore counts.

Another major achievement during the project was the average 5% lift in lambing performance. This was at a time when the Meat and Wool Economic Service database farms on the East Coast dropped their lambing percentages.

"This illustrates the real potential of Maori farms in lifting their production, because they do sit well below the average."

Torrie says the trustees are happy with the result of the project. "It's fair to say most of the projects we have been involved in have been successful."

However he was disappointed only two farms, Hereheretau and Whangara Farms, were continuing privately with the programme.