

Saving cash by scoring sheep

He's condition-scoring his flock. The numbers are part of a scale from one to five that's a way of rating the health of a sheep by the fat covering the spine and ribs. It's an integral part of a system called Sheep for Profit®, advocated by Te Awamutu-based farming consultants AgriNetworks.

It kept the Hornblows from joining many other eastern farmers in making a heavy loss in the worst drought in living memory last year. Their sheep maintained their health and the lambs survived, and even thrived. The couple still made a loss, a small one, but mainly because of low lamb prices. Things don't look any better on that front this year.

But it could be a lot worse. The couple, who lease 400 hectares (1000 acres) from Mr Hornblow's uncle, Ted Bibby, feel their stock have come through the long drought and unseasonably dry summer in pretty good shape. That's helped by their farming system, but also by their farm's normally damp climate, 330-480 metres above sea level on the rolling hills at the foot of the Ruahine Ranges close to the historic settlement of Onga Onga.



Geoffrey Hornblow edges his way along the race from sheep to sheep, pausing to place his hand on each woolly back. As he moves on, he calls out a number to his wife, Dale, who records it on a clipboard. On this day, the number is almost always the same. It's a three, occasionally a four.

They run 1800 ewes, 500 hogget ewe replacements, 400 to 450 hinds and 230 bulls. The deer and cattle are trading stock, bought young and fattened to slaughter weights, but it is the sheep that the farm is centred on.

The Hornblows have a relatively simple system, aiming to turn over all the lambs that aren't being kept as replacements before the rams go out to start the cycle again.

After more than 10 years of leasing small blocks in the district, they came to the farm to work for Mr Bibby in 1990, and took on the lease in 2003 when he retired.

An early change was to simplify the farm by going from breeding hinds to finishing them. Mr Hornblow says that, though venison prices were in a slump, he felt he could still make money from deer. The critical factor was to buy healthy well-bred stock and make sure they were always well fed.

Bulls come in as yearlings to clean up rank summer growth, and are wintered on a cell-break system, aiming to get growth of around half a kilogram a day before lifting that to 2kg a day on new spring growth. He expects them to be gone by Christmas and sets a financial target of \$1000 as a sale trigger.

He points out that the real gain – or loss, as he discovered last year – isn't revealed till the next year's replacements are bought.

Despite last year's poor result, he is encouraged by signs of future strength in the United States market and is optimistic beef prices will rise again.

When the Hornblows decided to take on the Sheep for Profit® system their performance already had them among the top 10 per cent of breeding-finishing farms in Hawke's Bay.

But they wanted to do better. "The idea of being better informed appealed to me," Mr Hornblow says. "I wanted reassurance I was doing a good job and hoped to find opportunities to do a better one."

Two years on, there's no doubt they are better informed and, while last year's drought spoiled their chances of an improved performance, they at least were able to survive it in good enough shape to expect to do well this year.

The first year was an audit – a check of the flock's health and performance made through regular weighing and condition-scoring. The Hornblows already weighed their ewes at crucial times and stepped this up to the required eight times – in mid-summer, pre-mating, mating, when the rams are removed, at scanning, before lambing, at tailing and at weaning.

They have kept it up in the second year. "It sounds daunting, all this extra work," Mr Hornblow says. "But it generally ties in with other activity. And why wouldn't you want to know how your ewes are doing? They're your most important asset. The whole farm is structured around them."

Condition scoring was new to them. They were told to place their palms on the ewe's spine, feel the ridges, then use their fingers to feel the fat covering the top of the ribs.

Mr Hornblow's explanation of how to score what they find is to make a loose fist and run his finger along the back of his knuckles. That is a four. Then he moves down to the first row of knuckles on the fingers – three. Then he spreads the knuckles apart and runs his fingers across them – two. A score of three or slightly better is the aim.

Physically laying hands on their sheep has brought them closer in touch with individuals rather than treating them as part of a flock. Animal health problems have been picked up early enough to be acted on and overall flock health has improved. Feed budgeting is essential, making sure enough pasture is available to keep them at the right weights and Mr Hornblow regularly tours the farm with a measuring stick.

The audit brought some minor changes. Lambing dates were put back slightly to be a closer match to grass growth, and faecal egg counts were stepped up to make sure ewes went into mating without internal parasite problems.

He says the Sheep for Profit® system has given him a set of protocols to keep to, and provided a good sounding board and source of advice focused on production. "Production comes first for me. Get that humming along and you've set yourself up to turn that into money."

The flock went into the drought in good order with a comprehensive health plan in place, focusing on vaccinations to prevent abortions, salmonella and barber's pole worms. The trading stock were reduced, freeing up pasture for the sheep, and the couple watched from their vantage point in the hills as the drought gradually rolled toward them across Central Hawke's Bay. However, the odd sprinkle of rain kept their hills green, though the grass got very short. That short grass provided an unlooked-for bonus in high metabolisable energy and helped keep weights up.

The rain when it came in June and August gave the farm a lift, but then the spring turned into an early dry summer, putting the stock under renewed pressure. But thanks to the regular monitoring, which allowed feed adjustments to be made; it turned out to be a fairly good season. Lambing losses were low and the lambing percentage at tailing was up to the farm's average of 147 per cent. The average lamb was sold at a respectable 16.5kg carcass weight. However, low lamb prices mean their efforts aren't rewarded. For

the Hornblows, who as leaseholders do not have the financial buffer that comes from land ownership equity, that is a bitter pill to swallow.

"We expected the return would be better than what we would get as a manager on a similar type of farm," Mr. Hornblow says. "That would allow us to build equity in stock ownership.

"But that hasn't happened – in fact we're earning less. We enjoy the job and we get satisfaction from achieving our production goals, but we're just not getting the financial rewards.

"I'm not sure we can hold out like this for much longer."