

Subdivision gives scope to lift lamb survival

A terminal sire policy offsets the summer dry environment on Shaun and Tracie Baxter's property.

The Baxters put all their 4100 ewes to a Poll Dorset Texel-cross ram on their 980ha (900ha effective) Pongaroa property. Their strategy is to de-stock lambs early for the potentially dry summer period, keeping no ewe replacements.

"The last three summers have been pretty good to us but selling lambs early is a good way of de-stocking in summer," says Shaun.

The weaning date varies from late November to early December at 90-100 days when greater than 80% of lambs leave the property. The bottom 20% have been retained for finishing up until this year (see story pg 6).

Lambs average 29kg at weaning and have been sold to the same Hawke's Bay finisher for the past three years.

To obtain replacements for the flock about 1200 ewes are purchased at the end of December and into January each year. This year half were two-tooths and half were mixed-age.

The flock is predominantly Romney based and ewes are purchased then to ensure they get the first Androvax treatment at the end of January. The second treatment is given six weeks before the rams go out in mid March.

Shaun is aiming to lift the weaning weight to 30-31kg and get 95% of lambs' away off-mum in the coming years as the effects of development kick in.

Investment in fertiliser, fencing and clearing gorse has been heavy in the past three years and Shaun is hoping increased weaning weights will ride on the back of improved lamb survival.

Better control of ewe intakes over winter is Shaun's main aim and this focus was determined via his participation in Sheep for Profit.

Shaun has just finished his first year in the programme, which has highlighted lamb survival as the driver of performance in the operation.

"Reducing wastage is our biggest opportunity and it will hopefully have a flow-on effect to better growth rates in lambs.

"To do that it is clear that having ewes in better condition coming out

of winter is the key. The lamb autopsy information showed no main cause of death but it was obvious better feeding would help reduce losses.

"But until all the fencing is complete we don't have the capacity to control their intake.

"Last year the ewes were 2.5-2.6 condition score coming out of winter but the target is a score of three.

"Sheep for Profit has identified that if they are below a score of three they can lose a conditions score of 0.5 from lambing to weaning and require more energy for themselves rather than putting it into the lambs.

When the Baxters' took over the property three years ago it had 18 paddocks and Olsen P levels of 6-9.

The focus has been on improving the 120ha flats first. Improvements on the hill country, including 200ha of steep hill and the balance non-cultivable rolling country, started last year.

"The flats were the main focus for fertiliser and fencing because they create a higher return.

"The first year all the paddocks on the flats were measured and split into ten cells/beef units. This gave us a 20-day rotation and we worked on fitting the number of bulls to the paddock rather than the other way around. The rising-two year bulls are grazed at 2.5/ha."

The Olsen P levels now show 25-30 on the flats and 15-20 on the hills. Spring and autumn applications of 200kg DAP have been used each year and Shaun says they are not far off switching to maintenance applications.

"We will continue to put on 60-70kg urea/ha in spring though."

Fencing on the hills began last winter and Shaun hopes to have 40 paddocks by the end of next winter.

"Our biggest challenge has been that 18 paddocks on the hills didn't allow for a rotation and so from the beginning of July ewes were set-stocked. In big paddocks they would hang in some parts of the paddocks and covers just weren't there at lambing time even though we were putting on urea.

"This year the 80kg urea/ha applied in late May plus 20% more fencing had set us up well. It was a kind July



Shaun Baxter has started fencing the hill country pictured behind him to give him better control over ewe intakes, especially over winter. He is hoping this will improve their condition to a score of three at set stocking.

giving good grass growth rates and the ewes held their condition better than expected and we ended up with greater losses from bearings."

In 2003 the flock scanned 156% and docked 107% and last year the ewes scanned about 170% and docked 125%.

The result for this year is unknown although the flock got hit with *Campylobacter* and 10-12% of ewes aborted their lambs.

"We had vaccinated the two-tooths against *Toxoplasmosis* but we had never had a problem with *Campylobacter* before. Next year we will be vaccinating all ewes with both and my aim is to achieve about 135% lambing."

The flock starts lambing in mid August after being six monthly shorn at the end of May.

"This is working well for us because the weather is kinder at this time and we get the estimated advantage to placental development of up to 10%."

The ewes are shorn again after weaning in early December.

Selling store lambs at weaning has a beneficial effect for worm control as lambs only get one drench between docking and weaning if required. It also means lambs are not contaminating pastures over autumn.

Barbers pole can be a problem in the

autumn around Pongaroa and this year Shaun drenched all the ewes against it.

Sheep for Profit analysis showed that was a good decision as one of the farms in the Pongaroa group calculated a \$16,170 cost from not drenching. The main factor was 330 less lambs because ewes were 5kg lighter at mating.

"We thought the weather was right for barbers pole and it is the first time we've drenched the whole flock for it.

"Going on the figures for those who didn't, it was the right decision. At \$1558 the drenching cost just isn't an issue when you look at the benefits."

The worm burden of ewes was also monitored at set stocking.

"The ewes had no worms at set stocking but at docking one out of five had a high worm count and so the lighter conditioned 20% ewes plus the two-tooths were drenched.

"We used to use capsules here but as no resistance was detected in a drench test this year the vets have recommended we concentrate more on improving ewe condition to minimise their worm burdens."

The introduction of 200 mixed breed cows to graze 100ha of lighter argillite/sandstone soils also ensures ewe performance is maximised.

"This is our first year with cows as we realised the ewes were not

performing on that area. It was mainly land straight out of gorse that was predominantly native grass pastures so we decided calving cows would be a better way of utilising that country." Ewe numbers were reduced from 4800 to 4100 this summer to accommodate the cows.

The cows started calving from mid September and a month after calving are spread throughout the hill country to maintain pasture quality over the summer.

A mob of 120 Wagyu-cross two-year steers also graze the hill country on a 12 month grazing arrangement with Brownrigg Agriculture.

The cows will be weaned in April and the bulls will go onto the beef unit and Shaun is looking for an average of 200kg in the heifers which will be sold store.

There are further areas of gorse on the property that are being eliminated via a programme spraying or cutting 40ha/year.

Improving pastures out of gorse, fertiliser and fencing has meant the stocking rate has lifted in the past three years.

"This winter we were carrying 7500 stock units easily compared to the first year when we were carrying 6500, but it was a high 6500 and should really have been 6000."

Sheep for Profit fine-tunes system

Fine-tuning his sheep operation was the motivation for Shaun Baxter entering the Sheep for Profit system last year.

"We went in to gauge where we were at and where potential gains could be made," says Shaun.

He has just finished the first year involving intensive monitoring to paint a picture of the operation.

"It includes weighing stock regularly, condition scoring ewes, testing stock for trace elements, fertility and lamb autopsies. It is not necessarily beneficial financially in the first year because it is retrospective information but it sets the benchmark for opportunities to be made in the second and third year.

"It is not the magic answer but a tool for assisting your farming."

The three-year pilot programme including 50 farms from across New Zealand lifted gross income per farm by \$67,752 above the national average from 2001 to 2003.

Successful applicants each have a Sheep for Profit advisor and the measurement system helps them identify what's driving or hindering farm performance.

Farmers set their own goals and can achieve significant rises in revenues and cash surpluses.

For more information contact Fiona Owen, 07 872 0247.