

The Sheep's Back

The Sheep's Back program aims to inform woolgrowers in WA of best practice grazing management so that, upon implementation, they could lift profitability by as much as 10 per cent as a result of increased stocking rates.

The program particularly targets woolgrowers from mixed farming enterprises, who often pay less attention to their sheep enterprise compared to crops.

The program is structured around a nine-module program that provides participants with better knowledge of seasons and stocking rates, so that they can capitalise on good seasons with increased stocking rates. This approach is balanced with an innovative risk management called the "Back Door". During the program, all participants produce their own farm plans to successfully deal with deterioration of the season if and when it occurs.

WA farm consultancy company ICON Ag developed The Sheep's Back concept in conjunction with Australian Wool Innovation Limited and the program was launched in Perth during 2005.

The project also has support from the WA Department of Agriculture and local industry bodies.

ICON Ag places a special emphasis on developing understanding of the program within industry and so has undertaken workshops with wool brokers and farm management consultants to great effect.

Activities

The Sheep's Back program is based on structured group activities, which address grazing management, production and business issues that can help participants to improve their enterprises.



Kristen Lefroy with his father Bruce selecting rams for progeny testing at 'Cranmore' Merino Stud.

The first two modules use historical pasture data and production records to help producers identify the limitations of their current practices.

In modules three to five, producers benchmark their sheep enterprise and identify goals, targets and strategies for their enterprise to increase stock numbers and stocking rate and reduce the cost of production in order to increase profit.

Modules six to nine provide technical content, solutions and support materials customised for local conditions.

Benefits

This course is about identifying and demonstrating the key profit drivers of the sheep enterprise, establishing from the group what is stopping them from maximising these profit drivers, then addressing those problems.

The program's key objectives are for participants to achieve a 10 per cent on average increase in stocking rates and profitability and to reduce the cost of raw wool production by an average of 10 per cent.

at a glance...

- The Sheep's Back program aims to inform woolgrowers in WA of best practice grazing management.
- The program aims to lift participants' profitability by as much as 10 per cent as a result of increased stocking rates.
- The program is based on structured group activities, which address grazing management, poor seasons, production and business issues.

Getting started

The program is available to all woolgrowing businesses in WA.

WA woolgrowers who wish to know more about being involved in The Sheep's Back program are encouraged to contact The Sheep's Back Project Co-ordinator Ed Riggall.



Case studies: Kristin Lefroy – Walebing

Narrowing profit margins have been the catalyst for Kristin Lefroy at 'Cranmore' Merino Stud at Walebing to move his business towards creating synergies between the different farm enterprises – including growing pulse crops such as faba beans and field peas, which provide nitrogen to the soil and have high summer feed value for his flock.

The value of pulse crop stubble for lambs is part of a push at Cranmore for increased growth rates in lambs, better lambing percentage and improved lamb production – a strategy taken from AWI's Lifetime Wool project. Kristin is also aiming to increase his stocking rate from 7.9 DSE/ha to 9.24 DSE/ha, through increased stock numbers combined with increased crop area.

This increased stocking rate will be fed under rotational grazing systems in winter and over perennial fodder crops and stubbles in summer. Kristin has shifted his attention from focusing on minor cost drivers to the main driver of stock enterprises – stocking rate.

Ewes are fed lupins for two to three weeks pre-joining and for the first two to three weeks of joining to maintain condition score at 3.0–3.5. This high early-summer condition score means some condition can be lost over summer without affecting the ewe's reproductive capacity.

From The Sheep's Back program, Kristin has learned it is too expensive to increase ewe condition score through supplementary feeding when there is no available green feed. Ewes need to be in good condition at the start of the dry summer autumn period.

Over the past 10 years Kristin and his father Bruce have concentrated on increasing fleece weight per head through selection for longer staple length without compromising fibre diameter (18 micron) or variation (CV) of fibre diameter (less than 20 per cent). Faecal egg count has also been reduced through selection for rams with lower FEC and plainer bodies.

Kristin believes these priorities have led to a significant improvement in the enterprise's foundations.



Ashley Wiese and father Darrell, 'Yarranabee', Narrogin are both involved in the Sheep's Back.

Ashley Wiese – Narrogin

Narrogin woolgrower Ashley Wiese is one of WA's farmers that the Sheep's Back program is hoping to attract. He is of a generation that has focused on cropping and has questioned the value of running Merino sheep for wool production.

Mr Wiese, with his wife Jo and his parents Darrell and Helen, run a 4,252 hectare mixed farming operation called 'Yarranabee' near Narrogin, which is predominantly cropping with Merino wool production and prime lambs as secondary operations. But his views about Merinos changed after participating in a pilot of The Sheep's Back.

"Over the last decade we've run Merinos as a secondary industry to our cropping operation, but as we increase our efficiency in cropping we also need to increase our efficiency in sheep to make the overall enterprise more profitable," Mr Wiese said.

Before attending the Sheep's Back pilot workshop, Mr Wiese said he had been thinking that the management strategies for their wool production were in conflict with their prime lamb enterprise, but he came out thinking differently and with a view to continue increasing stocking numbers.

"We knew we had to run high stocking numbers to increase wool cut per hectare but I thought that was detrimental to our lambing percentages," Mr Wiese said.

"I went to The Sheep's Back workshop thinking I'd have to drop stocking rate per hectare but I left thinking I had to increase it.

"The Sheep's Back program made me look at the problem from a different angle. It taught me to focus not on lambing percentages but on lambs per hectare. With data to support this view, I am convinced that increased stocking rates will lead to increased profits per hectare".

For more information

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