CASE STUDY

Fraser and Shelley Avery

At a glance

Fraser and Shelley Avery
Location: Bonavaree, South of Blenheim
2500 hectares, 3500 mixed age ewes and 1020 two-tooths
RapID tags

Challenges

- Tracking abortion in hoggets late pregnancy.
- Tracking incremental changes

Benefits

- Monitoring individual and small mob performance
- Linking carcase data to genetics
- Effectively record and track ewe weight, grazing management and fertility history

Fraser Avery is a steadfast advocate for onfarm monitoring. He is prepared to spend a bit of money on it, even when the benefits are not immediately obvious at the start.

Investing now for better future performance

At Bonavaree, climate monitoring stations have been installed with a view to finding out more around climate, soils and production. Although Bonavaree has exceptional ewe flock performance, Fraser sees room to do better. Having a large ewe flock of 3500 mixed age ewes and 1020 two-tooths, means that any changes, no matter how small, can make a big difference to the bottom line.

In 2019, Bonavaree ewes weaned 75% of their lambs prime with an average weaning weight of 40.5 kg. The average dressing out weight was a hefty 19.3kg for the season. While some farmers may sit back and relax at this point, Fraser has refocused on monitoring individual and small mob performance. And to do this, he is using Allflex electronic tags and a recording system. In particular, Fraser sees opportunities to maximise lamb survival by addressing issues with abortion in hoggets in late pregnancy. Together, with veterinary consultant Peter Anderson, Fraser is using electronic tags to record and track ewe weight, grazing management and fertility history. “We are looking at the post-mating weight loss of ewes and whether this, in turn, affects

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their foetus's future performance as a mother." It has been a bad year for hogget abortions and the issue is front and centre.

Bonavaree was a FarmIQ pilot farm and early adopter of tag technology. Through the programme the Averys had support to roll out EID tagging to young stock and train themselves and staff up on using the system and understand the data coming though. During this time, Averys were investigating different sheep breeds. They found linking carcase data to genetics very revealing. After a couple of seasons of tagging just the ewe hoggets and some ram lambs, the Averys decided to tag the remaining untagged mixed age ewes.

Part of the benefit of being involved was also free EID tags. When the free tag deal ceased, Fraser said he was quite undecided whether the costs justified the benefits. For two years the ewe lambs were not tagged with EID tags. At this point the health issue in hoggets becoming increasingly frustrating and Fraser realised he could use EID to get more information on what was happening. "Peter Anderson had a plan to address the issue but we really needed individual EID." "Someone told me years ago that if there is less than twenty percent difference, it is hard to see by eye." "This is why we measure and monitor. It's to get the incremental change." The current policy is to tag all ewe lambs.

The farm infrastructure includes a tailing chute with lamb weigh scale. This is when tags are put in and the lambs first data (tailing weight) is recorded against the tag number. The main sheep yard has a Racewell six-way auto drafter and conveyor. The new block Glenfield, has a Racewell three-way auto drafter. There are panel readers at both places but Fraser also has a wand that is handy to identify numbers in the race. The wand collects the data and Fraser uses Excel and FarmIQ to analyse it. "I really like technology and use Farmax and FarmIQ."

Once the data is sorted, he can put it back into the reader to instruct the automatic drafter to draft up a certain way. Carcase weights are added via information from the processing company, although pregnancy scanning status is not linked to each individual tag. "I couldn't see the benefit of this as, year after year, we see a twin have a twin." Fraser would like to use it to identify triplet ewes that only wean one lamb. Previously he has used it to track lamb weights on different forages. "We did a whole lot of work on this."

The best return on investment is still to come, says Fraser. "I'm learning how to get more out of it all the time, from talking to others who use it." In the meantime, this spring the ewes that have lost a lamb in utero will be scanned to see if their management was any different to those that didn't.

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