CASE STUDY

Ian Hopkins and Shelley Dew-Hopkins

At a glance

Ian Hopkins and Shelley Dew-Hopkins
Location: Rangiwahia, north of Feilding, Manawatu
2700 ewes, 660 ewe hoggets, 140 mixed age cows, 35 R2 heifers, 35 R1 heifers, 108 R2 trading cattle
RapID tags

Challenges

- Getting lambs away at an acceptable weight at weaning.
- Collecting error free, full pregnancy data at scanning time.

Benefits

- The software is learnable and Allflex are happy to help.
- Easily record scanning information on individual ewes, liveweights through the year, and increasingly, body condition score data.
- Scan and separate ewes carrying either a singles, twins or triplets, and early, mid or late lamber in their maternal and terminal flocks.
- Better ewe culling decisions.

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The couple farm a 540ha (effective) hill country property at Rangiwahia, north of Feilding, Manawatu. Better matching of feed at set stocking time to ewe scanning data is the primary driver for the continued use of electronic identification tags in the sheep flock of Ian Hopkins and Shelley Dew-Hopkins. The couple farm a 540ha (effective) hill country property at Rangiwahia, north of Feilding, Manawatu.

They were participants in the original FarmIQ pilot programme which gave them an early insight into the power of more data and its capacity to provide deeper traceability for meat processing partner Silver Fern Farms. The programme paid tagging costs for their entire lamb drop from 2013 to 2017, but the Hopkins have continued to tag each year's ewe hogget replacements since the programme ended. They have moved from Allflex button EID tags to the company's RapID tags and find they work well.

"We view the tags as a cost of being in business these days," Shelley says. The tags provide the opportunity to easily record

scanning information on individual ewes, liveweights through the year, and increasingly, body condition score data which the Hopkins know can help them elevate their flock's performance to a higher level, especially for lamb weight gain and average time to slaughter. They've concentrated initially on gathering individual scanning data so they can make better feed allocation decisions at set stocking time, primarily to improve the number of lambs available for slaughter at weaning time.

"We now have five-six years of scanning data on some ewes, and we're set stocking on both number of lambs and lambing date to make best use of available feed," Ian says. Their scanner, Mike Hare, scans each ewe as carrying either a single, twin or triplet lamb, and also as an early, mid or late lamber for both their maternal and terminal flocks. The twin and triplet, early and mid-lambing groups are set stocked on the safe hills adjacent to their easy country which is set up with specialist lamb finishing forages and new ryegrass clover pasture.

As each mob is docked, they are moved on to these 'high-octane' finishing areas until weaning. This move also frees up space for the singles and later multiple lambs to be spread out as they are docked across more of those easier hills, helping lift liveweight gains in those lambs too. This pattern has already yielded considerably better performance from their predominantly Romney ewe flock. The Hopkins used to struggle to get lambs away at acceptable weights at weaning in late December or early January. But last summer, their early multiple lamb mobs produced 900 prime lambs at 18-18.5kg in two drafts in late December and early January out of a total of about 1600 lambs on that easier country. "Three years ago, we never got lambs away till late January and often at lighter carcase weights. To get that number away by early January is huge for us up here especially given the drought that hit earlier this year," Shelley says.

To make the task of collecting full pregnancy data at scanning time easier and error free, Ian contacted a local computer hardware developer to help build a clever 'add-on' to automate the uploading direct to their weigh scale unit. Each ewe's ear tag is now scanned and saved as it enters the scanning crate where the scanner then records its number of lambs and lambing period on the data recorder with the click of buttons which automatically updates the weigh scale unit. "We were doing that manually before and it was stressful and not always that accurate. The EID tags are easy enough to read but keeping up with recording that scanning information manually was quite challenging," he says. "As soon as the scanner has finished each mob, we know exactly how many singles, twins and triplets we've got, and we also know how many of each group are early, mid or later lambing," Ian says.

From that data, the Hopkins create their set stocking plan, which also defines their docking plan and management of mobs on to their crops and new grass. Their next priority will be to add more liveweight and body condition score data so they can improve ewe performance through better matching feed to specific groups of ewes at critical times of year. "Getting weights is easy with EID tags. It's just a quick run through the yards and the data is collected conveniently for us," Shelley says. The scanning data is also enabling better ewe culling decisions and evaluating ewes to drop out of the maternal flock into their terminal mob. They are already marking twin or triplet-born ewe lambs at docking time and selecting replacements mostly from them in late January or early February.

Ian is responsible for the analysis of the scanning information. He says his background in computer science is a major help when it comes to creating spreadsheets and sorting data. "I can understand that some farmers might struggle especially if they have less experience than someone like me. But it's all learnable and there is support out there for anyone who strikes a problem," Ian says.