



CASE STUDY

Simon and Annabel Saunders

At a glance

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Location: Stag Valley, Castlerock, Northern Southland

SHEEP: 5800 Headwaters breeding ewes – 1350 elite flock ewes

1000 two-tooth ewes 3200 mixed-age ewes 1900 hoggets

CATTLE: 165 R1 dairy grazers 100 R1 Wagyu/Dairy cross 85

Angus/Wagyu dairy cross 60 R2 Wagyu/dairy cross 86 Angus

MA breeding cows 30 Angus R2 first calvers.

HDX lightweight buttons.

Challenges

- Breeding a crossbred sheep that suited the hill and high country.
- Producing an added value product that differentiates in the marketplace.

Benefits

- Can match DNA with EID tag, find out parentage, do conception scanning and give them a birth date.
- Takes the guesswork out of stock finishing.
- Lift kill weights by one kilogram in lambs and decreased mean sale date.



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Stag valley is a diverse sheep and beef breeding and finishing operation in the hill country of Northern Southland, home of the elite breeding flock of the Headwaters Group.

EID tags critical for headwaters flock improvement.

The four-way cross of Finn, Texel, Romney and Perendale genetics was founded by Wanaka sheep breeder Andy Ramsden in 2006. It was purposely bred with high levels of fat to thrive in the New Zealand high country. The group's breeding programme targets top ewes with high fertility and resilience to produce lambs with strong growth rates and a unique content of beneficial fats that maximise their health properties and taste qualities for consumers.

The Omega Lamb Project - a primary growth partnership between the Headwaters and Alliance Groups and the Ministry of Primary Industries - has evolved from this programme with the successful launch of the Te Mana Lamb brand in top-end restaurants in both domestic and international markets.

Owner Simon Saunders says one of his key goals when he joined Headwaters in 2008 was to develop a sheep breed that suited the type of country his family have farmed since 1965. "In the early to mid-2000s, there were a lot of dairy conversions going ahead and sheep farming was getting pushed further back into the hills," he says. "So we wanted a crossbred sheep that suited the hill and high country.

The second goal was to produce an added value product that we could differentiate in the marketplace, which we've done with Te Mana Lamb." Stag Valley has been using Allflex EID ear tags on its elite Headwaters breeding flock since the first sheep arrived on the property in 2008. Elite flock lambs are all tagged and DNA tissue samples are routinely taken at the same time to match their DNA with their EID tag. "We know their parentage through DNA and then do week of conception scanning which means we can give them a birth date." Simon says tailing is slower than commercial tailing. They have to be careful that everything matches up "because it is the one time to get it right." When Stag Valley started producing Omega lambs for the Te Mana Lamb brand, a condition of supply was that all lambs also had to have an EID tag, a critical element in supplying a premium market.

Over the past four years all commercial lambs, including replacement ewe lambs, have been EID tagged. Simon says tagging has taken the guesswork out of stock finishing. Historically, the property has always done well breeding stock but its finishing system "hasn't been anything spectacular". Through tagging they have been able to keep much more accurate data on how well lambs are finishing, which has helped them make big changes in how they use specialist forages - chicory, rape in autumn and Italian ryegrasses in spring and autumn - to maximise returns. "The only way we've been able to do that is by collecting good data and being able to measure exactly what we're doing, so there's no guess work," he says.

"You know exactly what every animal is doing." When mobs of lambs come off different parts of the farm they are weighed and their performance is measured against other parts of the farm or different forages used. "So that's been really critical in maximising our returns." Simon credits the input of his stock manager Allen Gregory for his technology skills and expertise in lifting and refining their finishing systems with forages over the last four or five years. Allen says their yards are well set up for five-way drafting, their EID reader is automated so there are

no issues handling stock. Finishing lambs are drafted three or four times through summer and all lambs are generally weighed once a month.

The farm uses FarmIQ to sort and store the data collected on a day-to-day basis to make on-farm decisions but Simon believes there is still some room for improvement in how they review stock performance over the whole season. He regards EID tags as an "absolutely essential tool" for Headwaters breeding operation and is a requirement for all Omega lambs they supply.

He says tagging has already paid for itself with improvements made in finishing systems alone. "Over the last two or three years, on average we've probably lifted kill weights by a kilogram in lambs and our mean sale date has come down about three weeks, although that is dependent on the season." "Probably four or five years ago we were averaging 17.5kg lambs where we're averaging over 18.5kg now."

Although commercial replacement ewe lambs have been tagged with EID tags for the last four years, this is the first season Stag Valley has started collecting data on the commercial breeding operation. "We have collected scanning data and will look to start collecting condition scores in the near future." He believes the next big breakthrough in technology will be when commercial sheep farmers can easily collect data on parentage. "That's when EID will make a huge difference in terms of profitability of our sheep systems because we'll be able to make decisions on how well those ewes are performing based on the amount of lamb they are growing at weaning. At the moment that is very difficult."

He believes there are huge opportunities in driving efficiency and profitability in many commercial ewe flocks when farmers have parentage data in a commercially available format. That technology is still evolving and will keep getting better with software packages that are easier for farmers to use. "I think the cost of tags will keep coming down so they will be more cost effective in future."



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