Now is the time to preg scan

Australian sheep breeders battling with dry seasonal conditions should consider pregnancy scanning to better manage their flock size and increase profit margins.

In times when stock feed is in short supply, pregnancy scanning allows breeders to identify ewes which are not in lamb for culling, as well as provide targeted nutritional support to twin-bearing ewes.

Chris Shands, Scanner Coordinator at the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC), said that from about 90 days from the start of joining, autumn lambing flocks could be accurately scanned for twin, single or dry.

“With this information, the dries can be sold, held onto or re-joined, and feeding priorities can be established for the twin and single bearing ewes,” Mr Shands said.

A recent study conducted by the Sheep CRC indicates that the benefits of scanning for either pregnant or dry ewes, or for litter size, are doubled in poorer seasons.

The study was based on scanning result of 95% (95 foetuses/100 ewes joined) for Merino ewes sampled, either on adequate nutrition compared to a 25% reduction in availability of pasture.

Operating as part of the Federal Department of Research’s CRC program, the Sheep CRC is a collaboration of industry, government and the commercial sector. It is working to increase productivity and profitability of the industry through new technologies for adoption by both the meat and wool supply chains.

Director of Cousins Merino Services, Michelle Cousins, said producers with large numbers of sheep should at least consider scanning for dry or wet ewes.

“You can sell off those dry ewes, concentrate on your more productive sheep and put less stress on your available pastures,” she said.

“For producers with more manageable stocking rates, deciphering whether you have ewes with twins or singles will enable you to split your flocks and feed accordingly. Ewes bearing twins will require more feed than those bearing singles and better nutrition for twin-bearing ewes can have a big impact on twin-lamb survival.”

Cousins Merino Services works closely with the Sheep CRC, with the service operating four ultrasound units, scanning about 700,000 sheep per year between South Australia, Victoria and the north-eastern pastoral areas of New South Wales.

Last year, Mrs Cousin’s clients were surveyed by her son Josh Cousins, as part of his studies, on their perceptions of the economic value of pregnancy scanning.
“The producers that participated in the survey estimated that they would make over $10,000 more in profit on their flock as a result of pregnancy scanning, even though this figure will vary depending on the number of ewes scanned and the reason for scanning,” Mr Cousins said.

The surveys showed that pregnancy scanning enabled producers to focus on their more productive ewes and in turn increased their lambing percentages.

“For example, a 5% increase in a flock of 1600 would be an increase of 80 lambs. If you sell the lambs for $50, that equals $4000,” Mr Cousins said.

“This is a conservative figure and doesn’t include any extra value you would achieve if adding wool production.”

“This represents a good return on investment for the cost of scanning and smarter nutritional management.”

• More information on scanning ewes is available at www.sheepcrc.org.au.

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Media contact: Janelle Holzberger on 02 6773 2927