CRC FOR SHEEP INDUSTRY INNOVATION

NEWS RELEASE

Monday, 21 November 2011

Breeding success in fight against flystrike

As sheep producers across Australia prepare for fly season, NSW grazier Bruce Taylor is confident his sheep can withstand the threat having come through relatively unscathed from last year's big wet.

Bruce Taylor and sons Geoff and Hugh, of Boxleigh Park Merinos, Wellington, have been breeding for body type for more than 12 years since joining the SRS Group.

One of the key results of this process of genetic selection has been less wrinkle, a major reduction in flystrike incidence and lower use of chemical treatments for the problem.

"We have had fewer fly problems since we changed to breeding plainer bodied sheep," Mr Taylor said. "While we still get flies, the situation is a lot, lot better than it used to be."

Each year, treatment costs and lost production associated with flystrike of sheep, costs the industry an estimated $280 million.

In August, the Taylors hosted a flystrike workshop conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC), the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI), and the SRS Group.

The Flystrike Prevention Workshop featured a number of specialists talking about new management and breeding techniques that have helped producers like the Taylors reduce the susceptibility of flocks to flystrike, thereby reducing costs and improving animal welfare.

The sheep producers attending the workshop all finished the day with their own tailor-made flystrike prevention program, and knowledge on how to utilise the on-going advice and support materials available via the FlyBoss website (www.flyboss.org.au).

Mr Taylor discussed the changes to his breeding program with the visiting producers, with his sheep on hand to showcase the positive effect of genetic selection for plain, low-wrinkle body type he has been breeding.

"By breeding out the wrinkle, we have been able to reduce the stress on our sheep and minimise the risk of flystrike," Mr Taylor said.

"We used to mules our sheep as a preventative treatment, but we haven't needed to mules sheep at our Wellington properties for five years."

Mr Taylor, together with wife Carol and their sons and their families, run two properties in the Wellington district covering about 4000 hectares, and a third near Carinda in the state's north-west – regions where flystrike has traditionally been a problem for sheep producers.

The Wellington properties range from arable, gently sloping country to good quality grazing hill country; the flatter Carinda property features heavier, loamy soils and saline herbage.

While Wellington receives an annual average rainfall of 600mm and Carinda 300mm, both areas can receive high levels of summer rainfall, making fly management a high priority.

In 2010 the Wellington blocks recorded 800mm between August and December, and Carinda recorded 725mm for the year.

Geoff Taylor, who manages the 5000-ewe commercial operation at Carinda, said that despite the high rainfall, he did not observe a single case of body strike all year.

“The conditions were pretty much perfect for fly strike, being so wet,” he said. “I checked the sheep regularly but we did not have a problem which was a relief.”

In total the Taylors run about 12,000 Merino breeding ewes, of which 25 per cent are surplus to requirements for their stud and wool operations, and are joined to White Suffolk rams to produce prime lambs.

The grown Merino ewes average 19.5 micron, and younger ewes 18-18.5m, while 300 young rams were recently tested for an average of 17.5m.

Mr Taylor said that the effect of genetic selection was proving to be very effective.

At their second shearing in August last year, the Taylors' August 2009-drop lambs, with seven months' growth of wool, had a staple length of 75mm, and the 19 micron fleece had a yield of 79 per cent and a tensile strength of 55 NKT.

“The main thing is to breed out the wrinkles. The warm humid conditions provided by wet wrinkles are really an ideal breeding ground for bacteria and an appealing place for flies,” Mr Taylor said.

"Now that moisture doesn't have the opportunity to be trapped in wrinkles and our wool is better aligned than it used to be, it dries out much more quickly so we haven’t needed to use flystrike protective chemicals on our older ewes for several years.

“If we’re having an above average wet summer we do apply chemical to our one-year-old ewes and lambs at lamb marking as they can be a bit more susceptible.

“We’re not using chemical to respond to flystrike problems; we just use it as an extra tool to protect our sheep.”