NEWS RELEASE

SHEEP CRC

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Flystrike planning pays at Stewarton

A preventative approach to flystrike treatment and a long-term investment in genetics are paying dividends for Campbelltown wool producer James Walch, who has not mulesed for the last three years.

Mr Walch, who runs a fine-wool flock on the 720-hectare property 'Stewarton' located on the Macquarie River near Epping Forrest, said the management program ensured his 2000-ewe Merino flock thrived through last year's wet summer.

"Last summer was very wet – one third of the property was flooded on three separate occasions – but our preventative fly program got us through," Mr Walch said.

"With our proactive fly control treatments and the introduction of new genetics for reduced wrinkle in our sheep, we haven't had any more major flystrike issues than what we would have had before – ceasing mulesing hasn't been an issue."

In developing his "proactive program", Mr Walch attended a workshop coordinated by Australian Wool Innovation and Sheep Connect Wool for Profit program and has followed the back-up information provided to producers via the Sheep Cooperative Research Centre's FlyBoss website (www.flyboss.org.au) which he has found to be most useful.

The Sheep CRC is a collaboration of industry, government and the commercial sector, which is working to increase productivity and profitability of the industry through new technologies for adoption by both the meat and wool supply chains.

"The information provided by industry at the workshop and the predictive tools for chemical treatments on the Sheep CRC's FlyBoss website really helped in my decision making," Mr Walch said.

'Stewarton' receives an average annual rainfall of 500-550mm, distributed evenly throughout the year. December is often the wettest month, meaning flystrike is always front of mind over summer.

The flock consists op 2000 ewes, 1800 hoggets and 500 wethers depending on pasture availability.
"We need to produce about 20,000kg of greasy wool each year or 100 bales in order for the wool enterprise to reach the critical mass it needs to be profitable," Mr Walch said.

The August-shorn flock averages 19.4 micron across the board, with the hoggets averaging 16-17m and the older ewes in the low 20s.

While predominantly a wool-growing enterprise, the property also produces 50 hectares of lucerne, 12ha of processing potatoes and 70ha of poppies for pharmaceutical companies, all of which are irrigated via centre pivot from the Macquarie River.

"Having a cropping operation to manage as well means we have to be very efficient with our stock handling – we don't want to be reacting to a fly wave and having to drop everything to treat sheep, because we have other competing priorities on the farm," Mr Walch said.

"So before ceasing mulesing, we did some risk analysis and thought about the management options for our flock. We felt that if we were on top of our flock management and maintained a pre-emptive approach of using fly treatments

before flies became an issue each season, we could get by without mulesing."

The first chemical treatment at Stewarton – an application of Clik – is applied at lamb-marking in the last week of October, and protects lambs through until weaning at the end of December.

At this point the lambs are crutched and treated again with Clik. If the season is good, this second treatment usually carries them through the fly danger period. If conditions deteriorate, Mr Walch will apply another jet treatment of Vetrazin late in summer.

The ewe flock is also hand-jetted with Vetrazin in late October and again in early January, which usually protects them through until crutching prior to the April joining. Again, depending on the level of fly pressure, Mr Walch will adjust the program to bring forward crutching if needs be.

However, one of the challenges Mr Walch faced in implementing his new approach was that his flock was comprised of highly productive, tight-woolled sheep. At the same time as his decision to cease mulesing, he took on the longer term breeding challenge of changing the sheep in his flock to low-wrinkle, plain-body types.

"We recognised early on that our sheep were too tight in their skin and very dense in their wool," he said. "We needed a more free-growing sheep and we believed that we could do that without forsaking our wool production."

Mr Walch shifted from pure Castellon bloodlines to sourcing his rams from the Nerstane Stud, Walcha, NSW.

Mr Walch has long been both a participant and host of wether trials, which helped inform this decision, along with the fact that the Nerstane genetics have been proven in summer rainfall conditions.

"We have since been selecting for less wrinkle, a longer staple and a less dense skin. But we expect our sheep to also be large-framed and produce high volumes of white wool," he said.

"What we've ended up with is not the typical plain-bodied Merino that some producers aim for, but a compromise that achieves our goals in terms of flystrike prevention and wool production.

"We are now seeing the results in our flock, with this year being the first year with 100 per cent of our lambs on the ground by Nerstane rams."

Mr Walch is strict on performance, with any sheep showing any wool colour, ill-thrift, excessive dag or wrinkle or fly strike marked for culling.

"We are seeing a change in our sheep. Our staple is lengthening, the wool density is changing and we're starting to see plainer bodies.

"We've taken the first turn on a long road but we're happy with the results and we're not about to turn back.
"I'm confident that the longer term impact of genetics, combined with a well-planned management strategy, will give the required protection against flystrike. I'm confident in the decisions I've made, but I've got to give this process time now."

- For more information on flystrike management, visit the Sheep CRC's FlyBoss website, www.flyboss.org.au