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Better breeding delivers against flystrike

While a wetter than average summer in South Australia has raised the prospects of flystrike problems for many graziers, Phil and Ann Hammat are confident their flock will come through unscathed.

The Hammats, of Baderloo Poll Merinos, Spalding, have been selecting for a plain body type and proactively applying preventative chemical treatments since they ceased mulesing in 2004.

Their flock of 900 stud Poll Merino ewes and 350 commercial ewes came through unharmed from last year's wet summer, which delivered an extra 200mm over and above their annual average of 425mm of predominantly winter rainfall, and resulted in a fly-wave throughout the Mid North.

"The 2010/11 summer was particularly bad fly wave for body strike in this area, but we didn't have any problems because we breed plain-bodied sheep, and we also work on a preventative approach with chemical applications when we can see a problem coming," Mr Hammat said.

"We select for very plain-bodied sheep with absolutely no body wrinkle, and a long-staple, white wool with very definite crimp, so that our sheep are flystrike resistant. However, we don't hesitate to use a backliner if with think there's going to be a fly wave."

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

In mid 2011 the Hammats hosted a Flystrike Prevention Workshop conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC), in conjunction with the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) and the SRS Group, of which the Hammats are members.

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 workshop featured a number of specialists talking about new management and breeding techniques that have helped producers like the Hammats 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 Sheep CRC's FlyBoss website (www.flyboss.org.au).

"I think the FlyBoss website is excellent for young farmers because it provides all of the information it has otherwise taken me 30 years to learn from experience. It's a really good tool," Mr Hammat said.



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Mr Hammat said the first step in controlling flystrike was to have a good understanding of the local conditions and of the flock make up.

Baderloo is in four lots totalling 800 hectares with hills grazing and a balance of arable land.

“We are fortunate to have a further 1200ha of grazing from two other neighbouring properties mainly for their summer stubbles,” Mr Hammat said. “This enables us to spell the hills during summer while the sheep graze through the stubbles before returning to lamb once the season breaks in April.”

However, this grazing strategy does expose the flock to grass seed problems in November before the shift onto stubble. This can result in sheep biting themselves and creating an opening for body strike. This situation is monitored closely as part of the Hammats proactive and preventative use of chemical treatments.

“Stopping mulesing made me become proactive rather than reactive – we now try to anticipate what’s going to happen and make sure we don’t have any problems rather than waiting until we have a problem and then trying to fix it,” Mr Hammat said.

He said breech strike had not been a problem thanks to the breeding program, combined with timely shearing and crutching in October ahead of the summer danger period.

“We have always had the crutching done by October to get rid of the dags from the winter period,” Mr Hammat said. “I’ve learnt from experience that in this area if the sheep aren’t crutched by October there’ll be breach strike right through until the next shearing.”

The Hammats have recently introduced twice yearly shearing for the entire flock in both April and October. While this has resulted in some discounting for wool length (now about 65-70mm at six months), an improved tensile strength (up from 25-35kN at 12 months to 45-57kN at six months) has more than compensated.

Wool yields have also improved, up from a 12 month average of 68-70%, to now deliver an equivalent yield in summer but up to 76.5% in winter.

“In fact, our six monthly shearings have delivered our highest priced wools,” Mr Hammat said.

“Selecting for plain-body, wrinkle-free sheep with long staple, free-growing white wools has made an enormous impact on body strike.

“You don’t have to save many sheep for these changes to be worth while – save two or three sheep and you’ve paid for your backliners.”

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



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