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New research targets top issue for wool industry

New research to identify Merino sheep which are less susceptible to flystrike could soon see Australian wool producers using the results in their breeding programs to reduce flystrike.

Trangie-based NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) technical officer, Tracie Bird-Gardiner, has been awarded a scholarship from the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC) postgraduate program to examine flystrike in Merino flocks.

“Flystrike is a serious issue for the wool industry and I will be using records of mulesed and unmulesed sheep from the Sheep CRC’s Information Nucleus program to develop a better understanding of the genetic links,” Mrs Bird-Gardiner said.

“The Information Nucleus data is valuable as it gives us flystrike records for older, unmulesed animals, which tend to have a higher incidence of flystrike.”

Chemical resistance in fly populations, along with market pressure to eradicate mulesing, is driving the need to develop a better understanding of the genetics which make sheep prone to flystrike.

Mrs Bird-Gardiner will examine the inheritance of flystrike susceptibility, both breech and body strike, in unmulesed sheep and look at indicator traits which can be linked to flystrike susceptibility.

“Significantly for western NSW producers, I will explore the correlations between flystrike, indicator and production traits in a low rainfall environment,” she said.

“In recent years, Trangie has recorded good rains in spring through to autumn creating favourable flystrike conditions compared with drier years.”

Flystrike records of progeny from the national Information Nucleus program include data from the flock based at the Trangie Agricultural Research Centre, where flystrike occurred at a rate of 16 per cent in young animals and 29 per cent in yearlings and older sheep.

Approximately 80 per cent of the strikes occurred on the breech of Trangie-born sheep, while the remaining strikes occurred on the body.

Mrs Bird-Gardiner, who was chosen as one of seven Sheep CRC postgraduate students in 2012, will work on her Master of Science degree at the Trangie Agricultural Research Centre through the University of New England at Armidale.

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