POLL DORSETS ...
Selecting a terminal sire for prime lamb production

POLL DORSET LAMB SUPREME

In a prime lamb production system improving the quality of the lambs is an important way of increasing profitability and efficiency. Choosing the right ram genetics for your system is the first step in maximising the potential profit.

Find the right stud

To maximise your profitability it's important to clearly define your breeding objective and target market, and choose a stud that can help you achieve this. To find a good match, look at a stud's target for future flock performance: how it aims to improve the traits of its own flock and how it measures these.

It is important that breeding traits have been clearly tested in a commercial environment; this will give you confidence knowing that the rams you buy will perform for you. Commercial testing can range from carcase competitions, abattoir feedback, sale yard results, or simply assessing how the genetics have been performing in other flocks.

Ask your stud to recommend rams that meet your objectives. Remember, they know their sheep and have the knowledge to advise you on your buying decision.

Visual assessment

Visual selection should be used to include sheep that exhibit desired traits, and remove sheep that have some physical fault.

Structure
Structure and balance of the animal is functionally very important.

Correct leg and foot structure will give the ram serving longevity, the ability to get around the ewes and a reduced risk of break down due to injury. A hind leg that is has a balanced curve through the hock, with strong upright pasterns, is essential. Feet should also be straight in walking, not turned in or out.

A smooth well laid in shoulder structure and neck set will reduce the risk of dystocia (lambing difficulty). During the birth process, square or blocky shoulders can inhibit the smooth movement of the shoulder of the lamb through the pelvis, leading to prolonged birth or death of the lamb. The shoulders of the ram should not be loose or wide on top, and the topline should be straight from shoulder to tail.

Muscle Shape
The shape and quantity of muscle on a ram is very important. We are, after all, producing meat.

Butcher requirements are such that a good shape in cuts of meat can attract a higher value. Width, depth and length of loin should be assessed and, together with a well fleshed hindquarter that has depth through the twist and good length from tail to pin bone, will give the butcher the premium carcase makeup they require.

Management Demands

Other visual traits can influence the ram buying decision.

A clean face and legs, free of wool will reduce wool blindness in lambs and will help reduce the problem of grass seeds in eyes.

Good dense downs wool means lambs look fresh for longer, giving extended opportunity to sell lambs prior to shearing. Dense downs wool on skins free of wrinkle and ribbing also improves the skin values. There are other management factors that may be considered, each producer has their own requirements.

Objective Measurement

Objective measurements give you knowledge beyond what you can see. There are two main categories available to use.

1. **Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBV):** This is an analysis of raw data – the animal's own data, together with data of all other animals through blood relatives and linkages, removing environmental variation – giving an estimated breeding value for the animal. ASBVs can help reduce the risk associated with ram selection; assisting prime lamb producers to more reliably meet market specifications. In a prime enterprise, weaning weight, post weaning weight, eye muscle depth and fat coverage are the key areas that are evaluated.

2. **Raw data (eg Stockscan):** These provide you with actual measurements of the ram. Usually this is live weight, eye muscle area and fat (measured with an ultrasound), and the ratio of the two relative to each other. Raw data is a useful tool when comparing rams from the same flock.

Deciding on how much to pay for rams

Many sheep producers buy lower grade rams because they can't see the value in paying extra dollars per ram. You will need to weigh up the initial savings against the lower performance of progeny from poorer quality rams. Remember, if you pay an extra $200 for your ram and he sires 200 lambs, that's only $1/lamb, and the improved quality of those lambs will give you a much greater return on investment.

Stud Management

It is important to have confidence in the stud's management, and to have a good relationship with the studmaster and classer. Having settled on a stud, keep in contact with them and, preferably, select replacement rams yourself. Stud field days, ram displays and local shows are all good opportunities to talk to stud representatives, and to compare what each has to offer.

Registered stud breeding programs have the advantage of quality assurance. Disease accreditations such as Ovine Brucellosis Free are vital for the commercial producers business. Be sure to check all accreditations are up to date.

Choosing a Ram

Many studs offer rams for sale based on a quality grade which divides animals into categories. The stud's classer will categorise animals on the basis of visual assessment, objective measurement or a combination of both.

Be careful with your selection, choosing a ram that meets your breeding objectives can make a significant difference to your profitability.

Your ram genetics are a critical investment on the farm. To find out more, visit
www.polldorset.org.au

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