

MARKETING AND DELIVERY OF RAMSELECT WORKSHOPS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA: A COORDINATED APPROACH

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SUMMARY

Achieving increased adoption of objective genetic information has been a long-running issue in the Australian sheep industry, particularly for wool sheep. Improving the understanding within the commercial ram buying sector of Australian Sheep Breeding Values and how they can enhance the accuracy of genetic selection will lead to improved genetic gain in commercial flocks and increase demand for seedstock producers to adopt objective genetic selection. RamSelect workshops are designed to improve the knowledge and confidence of ram buyers in the use of breeding values to make informed decisions when purchasing rams based on both objective and visual assessment. A coordinated approach to the marketing and delivery of RamSelect workshops has been used in South Australia with great success.

INTRODUCTION

Sheep Genetics (SG) provides a national genetic information and evaluation service for the meat and wool sectors of the Australian sheep industry, delivered as LAMBPLAN, MERINOSELECT and DOHNE. Sheep are ranked according to various production traits using Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs). ASBVs provide an estimate of an animal's genetic merit and performance that will be passed onto their progeny. ASBVs enable sheep breeders to select rams based on genetic potential, rather than their visual appeal, which can be affected by environment and management. Selecting animals on their genetic merit for the traits that are important to the business will improve the rate of genetic gain, more reliably meet market specifications and improve overall productivity.

Commercial ram buyers can use ASBVs to objectively compare rams and identify those that best suit their production system and target markets. However, the use of ASBVs by commercial ram buyers has historically not been as high as it could be (particularly in the wool/Merino sector), due mainly to a lack of understanding and thus mistrust of the science, and its application to their business.

The CRC for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC) and the NSW Department of Primary Industries, with input from Sheep Genetics, Meat and Livestock Australia, Australian Wool Innovation, the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) and the private sector, developed the RamSelect workshop with the aim of increasing ram buyer confidence in using ASBVs to select the best value rams for their breeding objective. The workshop provides skills in:

- understanding ASBVs and indexes and how to use them

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- understanding the value of selecting rams based on the expected performance of their progeny using ASBVs
- assessing, grading and valuing rams for purchase using both visual assessed traits and ASBVs
- describing a breeding objective
- developing a strategy for buying rams at the next auction or selection day

RamSelect received the Award for Excellence in Innovation at the 2014 CRC Association Awards. It was deemed to have resulted in significant uptake of new research and resulted in major improvements to industry productivity.

APPROACH

In April 2013, Rural Solutions SA, SARDI and the Sheep CRC recognised that a more coordinated approach to delivery of training to commercial sheep producers and their service providers on the commercial application of ASBVs, may increase the uptake and adoption of this proven technology. A coordinator was appointed to work within South Australia. The role was to identify and approach potential workshop hosts, coordinate a network of RamSelect deliverers, create promotion and marketing opportunities, and manage a state wide delivery calendar.

A network of ten service providers from both the government and private sector was established. New deliverers, who had not delivered the workshop previously were mentored and trained through co-delivery of the workshop. Regular phone meetings of the network were held where planning, strategies and experiences were discussed, and these were complimented by regular email contact. Opportunities were identified and delivery coordinated across the state. Potential hosts were identified by the network members and the coordinator was able to contact them personally. The most successful approach in contacting studs as potential hosts was a personal email with information attached about the workshop, with a follow-up phone call.

Workshop hosts were encouraged to actively seek involvement from local stock agents and also to involve local students when appropriate.

The coordinator was able to organise promotional articles which appeared in print in the State rural press, regional newspapers and breed society publications, as well as electronic media. Press coverage of workshops across a range of breeds was also organised. Attendance at key industry events such as the Adelaide Show and SG Regional Forums also enabled promotion of the concept of hosting workshops. Education was also organised with the rural media, to ensure that rural reporters had a sound understanding of ASBVs and how to report them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the period April 2013 to October 2015, 34 RamSelect workshops were delivered in South Australia, providing the latest approaches to using ASBVs for ram selection to 364 producers, 62 stock agents and 274 tertiary and secondary students. The most popular time for workshop delivery was in July – August which is in the lead up to most studs' annual sales. This means that workshop participants have an opportunity to apply their learnings in a practical situation very soon after the workshop. The majority of studs who hosted workshops were from the traditional meat breeds, but an increasing number of Merino studs became involved towards the end of this period. Stock agents were actively encouraged to be involved with workshops, and the large number (62) who did participate over this time has led to significant increases in their knowledge and confidence using ASBVs in ram buying decisions.

Evaluation of the RamSelect workshops nationally has demonstrated very positive support from participants:

- 93% indicated they now understood how to make better use of ASBVs
- 87% of participants could see how to improve their ram selection to increase returns
- 87% indicated they would use ASBVs to help select rams in the future
- 74% said they would ask their ram breeder for more information on the rams he is offering
- Participants rated the workshop 8.5 out of 10 for usefulness in assisting with ram selection
- Participants were highly likely to recommend the workshop to others

Many seedstock producers have reported an increased interest in the use of ASBVs by commercial ram buyers when they are making their ram selections. Producers who previously were not interested in looking at ASBV figures prior to purchase, possibly due to mistrust as a result of lack of understanding, now request the figures and actively scrutinise them prior to making ram purchase decisions.

The key success factors with this approach taken in South Australia were:

- A coordinated network of experienced, knowledgeable and credible deliverers, covering all regions of the State, and with a range of experiences enabling effective matching of deliverers with workshop opportunities
- Active networking of the delivery group providing access to extensive producer networks
- The network provided a supportive professional group that enabled sharing of experiences and ideas with workshop delivery
- Two person delivery of the workshops works well for engagement and enabled mentoring of new deliverers
- The dedicated coordinator was able to spend time approaching potential hosts personally, and also attend industry events with the express purpose of identifying potential workshop hosts
- The coordinator was also able to dedicate time to promotional activities

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