

THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF PERFORMANCE BREEDERS -
A NEW FORCE IN TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

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Performance sheep breeders in Australia are coming together in a dynamic new national organisation. The Australian Federation of Performance Breeders already comprises a wide cross-section of sheep breeders, researchers, communicators and businesses who share a common goal of increasing the profitability of commercial livestock enterprises through genetic improvement.

The clear objective of AFPB is to improve the effectiveness of the selection and breeding methods used in members' sheep flocks and in the livestock industry generally by:

- . increasing awareness of the benefits from performance breeding and of the opportunities made available by advances in knowledge and technology
- . assisting members to adopt improved breeding practices based on relative measured production and sound genetics
- . supporting ram breeders who are utilising such methods and encouraging others to do so
- . improving the marketing of performance-bred stock
- . involving and servicing performance breeders of other domestic livestock species, if and when requested to do so.

AFPB is not a breed society in the traditional sense. Its orientation is largely directed towards the commercial stock breeder and his or her profitability, as reflected in the composition of membership. Commercial sheep breeders, as distinct from ram producers, comprise over two-thirds of the membership, with associate (non-breeder) members accounting for half of the remainder. Improved returns to switched-on commercial producers who adopt performance breeding must, however, inevitably benefit seedstock producers who supply the right article.

Origins - Why AFPB?

Performance sheep breeders in Australia have in recent years become increasingly aware of a large gap in technology transfer. The sheep industry in general, and the wool sheep industry in particular, have, until recently, been slow to adopt proven measurement and breeding practices which could significantly increase the rate of genetic progress towards more profitable commercial sheep enterprises. All too often, the early adopters, researchers and extension workers have experienced isolation and lack of commercial support in spite of their deep sense of commitment to improving the welfare of the industry.

These factors, along with concern about the general lack of appreciation by commercial producers of the financial benefits from accessing performance bred stock and adopting performance breeding methods, have steadily increased pressure for the formation of an effective national organisation to support performance breeding.

The final catalyst was the reconstruction at June 30, 1989, of the Australian Merino Society (AMS). Although restrictive in membership, the AMS had successfully gathered together 1000 Merino breeders and reinforced their commitment to performance breeding.

The AMS reconstruction saw the division of the single large Australia-wide open nucleus breeding programme into a number of smaller regional and environment-specific programmes, along the lines recommended in 1988 by a consultative committee of leading Australian sheep geneticists (England, 1988). In strongly endorsing this reconstruction, the AMS membership resolved to support the formation of a new national organisation to service and represent all performance sheep breeders, and resolved also to transfer all non-sheep assets and staff of the AMS to this new organisation.

Representatives of the AMS Federal Executive immediately sought interaction with other leading performance breeders, especially with the NSW-based Federation of Merino Performance Breeders. Meetings of representative performance breeders were held in W.A., S.A., Victoria and Canberra, to gauge the level of support for a new national federation of performance breeders, and to elect a broadly-based steering committee.

Strong support was evident at all meetings. Consequently, the steering committee moved quickly to form, incorporate, launch and publicise an appropriate organisational structure, to be known as the Australian Federation of Performance Breeders. The executive of the inactive Federation of Merino Performance Breeders called a meeting to wind up their organisation, and recommended to all members that they join the new Federation.

The steering committee of AFPB, comprising eight elected members (two from each State meeting) plus an additional four co-opted members, met for three days in Melbourne during late September 1989 to formalise objectives and future strategies. This meeting also served to bring the members together into a committed team, and to establish a relationship with the Australian Wool Corporation and with the Australian Wool Research and Development Council. The steering committee, which comprises leading Merino performance ram breeders and commercial producers in addition to three members with special qualifications, has accepted the role of "Interim National Executive", and will continue in that role until the first Federal Annual General Meeting which has been scheduled for Albury Wodonga in August 1990.

Central Philosophy

The Australian Federation of Performance Breeders is a service organisation for performance breeders.

It is mainly about technology transfer, involving both the effective communication of existing and new information on improved breeding and selection methods to ram breeders and commercial sheep farmers, and the implementation of these methods in breeding programmes. An essential ingredient in effective technology transfer by AFPB is the strong activity base at regional level, with field days and meetings both to inspect, discuss and evaluate breeding programmes where new methods have been implemented and to provide adequate opportunity for member participation and reinforcement.

AFPB is also about marketing, to capture better financial returns for members' performance bred stock, wool, semen and embryos, both through improvement in the marketing/product evaluation systems, and through general promotion of the benefits from performance breeding and from purchasing appropriate performance bred stock.

Improved effectiveness of research and development and representation of performance breeders at all levels are further priority areas of the Federation. AFPB will work in closely with other organisations supporting and servicing performance breeders of farm livestock, to ensure maximum effectiveness of the available resources.

Collecting, assessing, collating and disseminating information relevant to performance breeding will be a most important role of AFPB. Throughout Australia (and New Zealand also) there are many organisations, groups and individuals with valuable ideas and experiences. The potential benefits to be derived by industry from the pooling and sharing of this knowledge are considerable.

It is also most apparent that the speed and complexity of technological development in the field of genetics and genetic engineering is becoming ever more intense. Technology transfer to the practical application stage by the commercial and all-important grass roots base of the wool industry is correspondingly slower and more difficult. We all know of the legal minefield surrounding the question of plant breeder rights for example. Has anybody yet tackled the question of animal breeder rights? It's later than you think.

Strategies for Achieving AFPB Objectives

The objectives listed earlier in this paper focus on improving the effectiveness of members' breeding programmes, on improving the market prices members receive for the wool, semen, embryos, rams and other sale stock from their performance bred flocks, and on general promotion of performance breeding at large.

The following strategies have been developed to achieve these objectives.

- . **Assistance with Formulation of Breeding Programmes** - encouragement of genetic improvement in traits of economic significance and assisting members to assess alternative genetically sound breeding practices and to adopt systems that will achieve their objectives
- . **Provision of Information to Members** - communication of information on effective breeding technologies and selection methods and on technical, flock management and business management practices
- . **Evaluation of Alternative Sire Sources** - encouragement and coordination of the evaluation of sire sources and communication of the results of such comparisons to members
- . **Member Support** - reinforcement of members in their choice of performance breeding strategies; partly by informing them of activities of other performance breeders
- . **Field Days and Meetings** - to provide opportunities for members to meet at regional, state and national levels
- . **Member Participation in policy development and associated activities**
- . **Promotion and Marketing Assistance** - promotion of performance-bred sheep and sheep products, and assistance with the marketing of rams, semen, embryos and surplus sheep

- . Publication of Register and Catalogue - involving the establishment and publication of a register of performance breeders and of a catalogue of performance tested sires, semen, ewes and embryos
- . Services to Ram Breeding Members - such as marketing, promotion and secretarial assistance
- . Research and Development - fostering the development of improved methods of performance breeding, by pressing for research and development activities relevant to members' needs and by evaluation of R and D findings
- . Promotion of Performance Breeding - by encouragement of industry-wide acceptance and adoption of performance breeding practices, and
- . Representation of Performance Breeders - to industry and government.

The two key short-term strategies for servicing members are to establish regional groupings of performance breeders and to ensure regular provision of appropriate published material.

Regional field days and meetings have already proven to be an excellent vehicle for member stimulation, support and learning, as well as for general promotion and market enhancement. Quite apart from information flows, such regional activities can effectively provide social reinforcement and overcome the sense of isolation that many performance breeders feel at the present time.

AFPB publications for members take two forms, "The Performance Breeder", for all members and "Ram Breeder Notes" for ram breeder members only. "Ram Breeder Notes" concentrates on technical information specific to ram breeding, while "The Performance Breeder" covers a wide range of technical and management information of interest and value to all commercial sheep breeders.

A third key strategy undergoing detailed investigation is that of marketing assistance. Listing of details of performance bred stock for sale in accessible catalogues, coupled with more efficient selling systems, is expected to significantly enhance the total demand and to increase prices accordingly.

The Future

The newly formed Australian Federation of Performance Breeders has excellent prospects. It is a National organisation of people committed to performance breeding of commercial livestock. It is led by successful performance sheep breeders, and has the unqualified support of leaders in the sheep industry, leaders not only in sheep breeding, but also in research, communication and textile processing.

There is no doubt that it will provide significant benefits to members. With strong industry support, however, AFPB can rise far beyond that, to become a major force in technology transfer to the financial benefit not only of producer members, but to the Australian grazing livestock industry as a whole.

Reference

ENGLAND, P.J. (1988). Proc. Aust. Assoc. Anim. Breed. Genet. 7:267.