

WOOLPLAN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA  
- EXTENSION SERVICES REVIEWED

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SUMMARY

The Australian Wool Corporation has funded the research and development of WOOLPLAN, and State Departments of Agriculture have agreed to support the extension program.

In South Australia this has involved an awareness campaign run with limited state resources. The next phase is to concentrate on breeders getting WOOLPLAN information. Departmental structure and contracting state operating funds are limiting factors in encouraging the adoption of WOOLPLAN by breeders.

The Department is moving to supplement its budget by introducing fee for service. The effect this will have on the WOOLPLAN program is largely unknown. After review, the status quo could well be maintained. Another scenario is that extension officers will be forced to turn their attention to income generating programs at the expense of the WOOLPLAN program. Without industry support, WOOLPLAN promotion could virtually cease. The development of marketable breeder packages is another possibility. Whatever the outcome, unless industry ensures adequate resources are allocated to WOOLPLAN promotion in South Australia, progress will be slow.

INTRODUCTION

WOOLPLAN, Australia's National Performance Recording Scheme for wool producing sheep was launched in 1987. The South Australian Department of Agriculture agreed at Animal Production Committee level to promote WOOLPLAN to South Australian breeders and woolgrowers. It is striving to meet that objective despite limited resources.

The Australian Wool Corporation funded WOOLPLAN extension by appointing a National Coordinator, with specific responsibilities.

ADVISORY SERVICES

The South Australian Department of Agriculture is organised into Divisions and Regions. Divisions overview specific industries and disciplines, and provide technical specialist backup to the regions.

Formalised training on sheep breeding has been funded by the Australian Wool Corporation, who financed the attendance of the majority of advisory officers at the 1988 New South Wales Sheep and Wool Refresher course. This brought those officers up to date with sheep breeding technology at that time.

No formal training has been conducted since.

## PROGRESS

Subjective assessment of the WOOLPLAN extension campaign to date, suggests about 100 breeders (25% of registered stud merino breeders) now get WOOLPLAN information in South Australia. It is unclear to what extent breeders understand the WOOLPLAN printout or how they are using WOOLPLAN information in worker ram selection or in grading rams for sale.

A questionnaire has been sent to all South Australian registered Stud Merino breeders to objectively answer these questions.

Verbal criticism of WOOLPLAN from breeders predominantly centres around perceived inaccuracies of testing, and mistrust of young age tests for ranking animals on genetic merit. These issues need to be addressed in the future.

## FUTURE PLANS

State livestock officers currently do not have the expertise and confidence to deal with parent studs. Personnel resources are insufficient to significantly stimulate commercial woolgrowers, into demanding WOOLPLAN information from their ram breeders. In the next few years, therefore, we will concentrate on the ram breeding sector where we can achieve the greatest return from our limited resources, namely those breeders currently getting WOOLPLAN information.

This will require a shift from group work to one to one breeder interaction. To be done properly, increased financial support and improved computing facilities will be required. State funds are contracting. External industry funds will be sought.

## STAFF CHANGES

With limited personnel resources, the implication of staff changes can be dramatic. After a period of stability, recent staff changes have meant we now have some officers with little training in sheep breeding. Their skill upgrading is being addressed primarily through on the job training. More formalised training may be required, for which resources are scarce.

A more serious problem occurs when an experienced officer leaves a district servicing a major ram breeding community. Regional structure and limited state resources do not allow this gap to be covered. Budgetary restrictions cause delays in refilling positions. If filled, it is unlikely the new officer will be as experienced.

Regions are responsible for the administration, management and funding of front line services to rural communities within their boundaries. Each region is made up of district offices, from which teams of specialist extension officers identify problems and provide advice to producers on critical factors affecting farm output and viability. These district officers are responsible for the evaluation of district needs and the planning, execution and reporting of extension programs to meet those needs.

Genetic improvement of sheep can be assessed as high priority in one district and of low priority in another. Individual livestock officer involvement in the WOOLPLAN extension program reflects this. Some livestock officers have a combination of extension and regulatory roles, which immediately limits the amount of time they can allocate to programs such as promoting WOOLPLAN. Statewide, the equivalent of one full time person (FTE) is spent by livestock officers on the WOOLPLAN program.

#### CURRENT ADVISORY ACTIVITIES

As with the New South Wales Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, genetic improvement of sheep is a high priority in the South Australian Department's strategic plan. Unlike New South Wales (Kearins 1990), there are no formal activities prescribed for advisory officers.

Until now, the WOOLPLAN program has largely been an awareness program. Both ram breeders and commercial woolgrowers have been targeted at a range of venues.

All regional Stud Merino Breeder Associations have had formal sessions on WOOLPLAN. This will be repeated if requested by the breeders. Displays have been held during most South Australian Stud Merino field days. Livestock staff also endeavour to make individual contact with as many stud breeders as possible during these field days.

Commercial growers have been targeted through the Agricultural Bureau system, which comprise small groups of farmers throughout the state, meeting on a regular basis.

In 1987 a state WOOLPLAN coordinator was appointed in South Australia. The coordinator primarily provides a link between the National Coordinator (and therefore the WOOLPLAN Management Committee) and South Australian livestock officers, ram breeders and State wool testing laboratories. This accounts for approximately 30% of this officer's time.

In 1990 a State WOOLPLAN working party was formed, consisting of livestock officers servicing the major ram breeding areas of South Australia. Recommendations from this group have already been considered by the WOOLPLAN Management Committee.

Training of Livestock Officers has been primarily in house training and learning from experience through breeder and commercial woolgrower contact.

This will be of particular importance in our new phase of one to one breeder interaction.

#### FEE FOR SERVICE

To supplement contracting state budgets, the Department of Agriculture is planning to implement income generating policies. This will dramatically alter the way our extension services will operate. If the New Zealand situation is any guide (Thomas 1989), extension officers will become consultants. They will necessarily swing away from programs such as the WOOLPLAN program, to income generating programs. This is unless non income earning programs are financed from external sources.

Alternatively, the move may stimulate novel approaches to the way we operate. This may include selling breeder "packages". A pilot consultancy service has been well supported by South Australian breeders and possibly could be expanded. No state livestock officers currently have adequate training in sheep genetics to expand the consultancy service.

If the WOOLPLAN program were viewed as a public good program, the level of state support may well be maintained under the new policies.

#### FUTURE FUNDING

Increased external funds are already required for the continuation of the WOOLPLAN program in South Australia.

It is my view that industry, via the Australian Wool Corporation, must either come up with an alternative to using the South Australian Department as the WOOLPLAN technology transfer agency or alternatively provide significant funding for salary, operating and computing facilities for the Department to run an effective WOOLPLAN campaign. Otherwise little progress will be made in the adoption of WOOLPLAN by South Australian sheep breeders.

The Australian Wool Corporation has invested heavily in sheep genetic research over the last 20 years. The results are now in a form useable by the sheep breeding industry. Greater funds must be allocated for transferring this technology to ram breeders.

As stated by McCausland representing the Australian Meat and Livestock Research and Development Corporation, "If research is not put in place in the industry, it may as well not have been done."

#### REFERENCES

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