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Different breeds, different management?

Condition scoring ewes can help producers assess if ewes – whether Merinos or non-Merinos – are receiving adequate nutrition and are on track to optimising their reproductive performance. But does that nutritional management need to be the same – regardless of breed?

The answer is “maybe not,” according to Dr Janelle Hocking Edwards, a research scientist in grazing production systems at the South Australia Research and Development Institute (SARDI). Janelle has completed an MLA-funded review of the research on this topic.

A sheep producer herself, Janelle runs 1,500 non-Merino ewes (Border Leicester x Merino) as well as a flock of 3,500 Merino ewes in South Australia’s south east.

When comparing the two types of sheep, Janelle sees a difference between the Merinos and non-Merinos in their response to nutrition, yet all current nutrition guidelines are Merino-based.

“I use Lifetime Ewe Management guidelines for my Merino ewes and am really impressed with how reliable the guidelines are,” Janelle said.

“However, we generally need to start feeding our Merino ewes a month earlier in the season than our first-cross ewes, to achieve the same target condition scores at mating and lambing.

“When we do start feeding them, the crossbred ewes seem to need less feed to maintain that condition score.”

Could this be hindering prime lamb production, and is there an opportunity to improve business performance?

“The current models assume a sheep is a sheep and it doesn’t matter what breed they are – you feed them based on their liveweight,” Janelle said.

“This is despite evidence in the scientific literature that non-Merino ewes outperform Merino ewes for key lamb production traits when managed under identical conditions.

“It is possible that matching inputs to the actual needs of non-Merino ewes has the potential to increase stocking rates, decrease supplementary feeding costs, increase reproductive efficiency and increase turnoff rates – thereby reducing cost of production.

“For example, supplementary feed requirements of non-pregnant adult non-Merino ewes can potentially be reduced by 14%, or stocking rates increased by 14%, compared to management guidelines recommended for Merino ewe management.

“However the LTEM guidelines remain the recommended guidelines until there is further research as to how they can be adjusted for non-Merino ewes,” Janelle said.

According to Janelle, just as there are different recommendations for dairy and beef cattle, a sheep bred for wool production is different from one bred for meat production or fertility.



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“The crossbreds may simply be better at foraging in the paddock or maybe they are more efficient at using their feed. I’m not sure which, and that’s really where this project came from – to determine the actual difference in efficiency of nutrient utilisation between Merino and non-Merino ewes and the potential industry impact,” she said.

Lifetime Ewe Management program leader Darren Gordon said further research was being done to work out some of the finer details of the terminal and maternal industries.

The project will provide the foundations to develop next generation, genotype-specific guidelines for the management of non-Merino ewes.

<http://www.mla.com.au/News-and-resources/Industry-news/Different-breeds-different-management>