



Worms turn as hi-tech genes save flock

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WALCHA sheepman Martin Oppenheimer is as proud of his own pedigree as he is of the lineage and reputation of the stud merino sheep his family has bred since 1868.

But the fifth-generation NSW grazer admits that if it weren't for the adoption of some hi-tech modern genetics and selection techniques, it would be impossible for him to continue to breed and farm sheep on the high-altitude New England Tablelands where he lives.

Twenty years ago, the future of his family's merino stud was at stake, with the family locked in a battle against stomach worm infestations devastating their flock.

His father was chemically drenching their 3000 sheep once a month to control the ill health, production losses and deaths the worms were causing, and spending a small fortune on chemicals.

But the worms were developing resistance to common chemicals and becoming harder to kill, requiring the sheep to be mustered and dosed more frequently.

"Yet every time more worms were surviving and we kept on

having to search for yet another, more expensive chemical to control them," Mr Oppenheimer recalled. "I became convinced that we had to go right back to the basics of breeding and pasture management to find a better way."

Worms remain the biggest cause of lost production of meat, wool, lambs and sheep, estimated to cost the industry \$369 million a year in sheep and lamb deaths, lost wool and meat production and the purchase of chemical treatments.

Since 1995, costs of controlling intestinal worms have escalated by 66 per cent.

Infestations of worms have become so bad in some colder and wetter sheep regions — western Victoria, Tasmania, the Monaro high plains and New England Tablelands — that some farmers have had to abandon sheep in favour of tougher cattle.

Mr Oppenheimer, with the help of geneticists working at the Sheep Innovation Co-operative Research Centre at the nearby University of New England, made the novel decision to keep only sheep and lambs that were somewhat resistant to worm attack.

He counted the number of

worm eggs in the faeces of any young male lambs that might become his future rams, responsible for breeding the next generation of his flock.

It has taken 15 years but now every sheep in his Mr Oppenheimer's stud flock carries the dominant set of genes that imparts resistance and resilience against worm attack, as do all the rams and semen he sells. His sheep don't get infested with heavy levels of worms, and are able to thrive and still produce superfine wool, heavy fleeces and fast-growing lambs when a low level of worms are present.

Instead of drenching monthly or bimonthly as others do in his area, Mr Oppenheimer has to drench his young sheep only once a year and older ewes two to three times at most.

James Rowe, director of the Sheep Innovation CRC, agrees with Mr Oppenheimer that overcoming sheep worm problems sounds prosaic.

But he said it remained one of the key issues if Australia is to double its lamb, wool and sheepmeat production by 2050, as laid out in the National Food Plan.



Fifth-generation NSW grazer Martin Oppenheimer, at his Walcha property, says hi-tech genetics have saved his flock from the scourge of intestinal worms

JAMES ROU CHER