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## **Establishment of a farm monitoring scheme for sheep farms**

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### **ABSTRACT**

CF2000 (Clutha Farms 2000), and now NZFT2000 (New Zealand farm technology 2000), make big changes in sheep farm management and business skills available to the individual farmer on his own farm in easily understood, easily workable, and low cost form. The basis of management changes has changed from those based on traditional subjective and often anecdotal information, to a management system where decisions are made on factual timely information backed by latest technology and business abilities.

**Keywords:** Sheep; monitoring; benchmarking; management.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A quiet redevelopment is going on in the sheep industry that makes big improvements possible on individual properties and can have huge flow-on benefits for many rural communities as well as the whole New Zealand economy. Far from being an agricultural 'sunset' industry sheep farming can provide some of the best long-term prospects in New Zealand agriculture.

### **ORIGIN**

In 1995, a group of Clutha district sheep farmers concerned at the very low sheep farming returns since the mid 1980s, and seeing little prospect of greatly improved market returns, decided to do something to improve their own situation and that of the whole district.

Clutha district already had its own District Sheep Council, which in 1999 is the only district based sheep council in New Zealand run by and working for the local sheep farmers. Clutha also has the Clutha Agricultural Development Board, which is unique in being a strong local community-owned and operated group working for the improvement of agriculture and rural communities in the district.

In 1995, Clutha District Sheep Council formed a working group consisting of Errol Holgate (sheep breeder and sheep farming advisor), John Labes (sheep farmer, past member of NZ Wool Board and WRONZ, chairman of NZ Sheep Council), Bruce McCorkindale (sheep farmer and agricultural consultant; now operations manager for CF2000 and project manager for NZFT2000), Alan Shaw (sheep farmer and stud breeder, past chairman of the Clutha Agricultural Development Board; current chairman of both CF2000 and NZFT2000) and Peter Fennessy (former general manager of Sheep and Deer Division of AgResearch, sheep scientist and consultant). All are still actively involved with the service. This group had administrative support from Clutha Agricultural Development Board and good progress was made to form the CF2000 (Clutha farms 2000) farm technology service in 1996 with the slogan 'taking

Clutha sheep farms into the year 2000 with 2000 technology'.

This working party met frequently and consulted widely in 1995 and 1996, looking at ways to best improve the on-farm situation for the individual farmer. Emphasis was put on the management and business of sheep farming and the decisions made within the farm gate, which could be influenced by the individual farmer.

Modern management systems in the dairy industry and particularly those being developed and demonstrated in the MRDC monitor farms provided excellent examples of workable management policies and systems that were not available to the individual sheep farmer for use on his or her own property. In every case it was achieved by carefully monitoring or measuring production and performance to find the strengths and weaknesses and then making the necessary changes. There were no monitoring programmes for the sheep industry that could be applied by the individual farmer on his own farm particularly at basic levels and where benchmarking could be accurate and credible across all flocks. The working group set out to research, design, test, and put in place a monitoring and benchmarking programme and the infrastructure to make it work. The result now is a service designed by farmers for farmers and is achieving some outstanding results.

### **GROWTH OF CF2000**

From that beginning, the CF2000 service has expanded from operating on 52 Clutha sheep farms in the 1996-97 season to 280 properties in 1998-99 in the South Island in three separate branches of NZ Farm Tech 2000 Inc. (NZFT2000). NZFT2000 in the 1998-99 season has 70 farms in South and West Otago (CF2000), 140 farms in Southland as (SF2000+) and 70 farms in South Canterbury (FB2000). There is also wide interest from other areas in the country to expand the service.

NZFT2000 is owned and directed by participating farmers, and is a non-profit organisation with the specific targets of greatly improving pastoral, and particularly sheep,

farming profitability. It has the CF2000 slogan, expanded to include all of the country: 'to take New Zealand sheep farming into the year 2000 with 2000 technology'. A board of seven farmer directors now directs NZFT2000 as an incorporated society with a project manager overseeing the service and its development. Each branch is constituted as an incorporated branch of NZFT2000 with its own management committee and an operational manager who operates the bureau and runs the field days and workshops.

### **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

The work being done by Jim Johnstone, of Shand Thomson Accountants of Balclutha, analysing the farm statistics of their large Clutha District farmer client base showed that there were plenty of areas for improvement to bring the average performance up to that being achieved by the top 25%, as well as the possibilities within the top 25% of achieving the performance level of the very top sheep farmers.

If the Clutha District income from 3,000,000 sheep stock units (su) could be increased by \$10 per su per year over a few years, and this was seen as a definite possibility, that would put about \$30,000,000 extra into the district economy. Only about \$6 per su needed to be achieved on-farm with the other \$4 coming from processing and services.

### **HOW FARM MONITORING WORKS**

NZFT2000 and its branches provide unified and easily followed procedures that make the monitoring and benchmarking accurate and reliable across a large number of sheep farming properties and range of land types and climatic differences. This programme quickly identifies the strengths and weaknesses in a flock and on a property. The key to progress is knowing what to change and NZFT2000 quickly shows where that should happen. NZFT2000 uses an on-farm monitoring system where stock performance and production are measured at critical times of the year and then these results are benchmarked against the results from other comparable properties. Most of the on-farm information is collected during routine stock work and is sent on supplied forms to the branch computer bureau at specified times during the year. The farm information is entered on the special database, built and operated by AgResearch for NZFT2000.

The farm reports coming from the database are the

analysis of the current farm information supplied, past information for that flock and property, and the comparison (benchmarking) with all other comparable properties using the service. Consultant's comments, branch field days and seminars complement the reports showing where and how improvements can be made and where there are issues of concern.

### **ACHIEVING BENEFITS**

Planning, good management, accurate measurement and monitoring are now essential parts of any business and must be included on any really successful sheep farming property. The whole concept has proven to be a big success putting new enthusiasm and motivation into sheep farming. A little more work is needed on-farm in undertaking the NZFT2000 programme but it focuses on what is really important on each property and gives the farmer the ability to at last make those most important policy and management decisions on accurate information.

Farmers using the new monitoring and benchmarking technology may need to undergo a small learning curve. To monitor is to know what is happening. To benchmark is to compare what in your system will respond best to some fine-tuning. When various important simple measurements are combined, production can be viewed in ways a stockman cannot see when viewing a mob of sheep. A farmer may know if lambs looked good at weaning but how good are they in relation to the size of their mothers? Do changes in ewe body weight indicate management changes that could greatly improve weaning weight? Is genetics or feed management the limiting factor?

The discipline of monitoring is entirely up to the individual farmer. The rewards of benchmarking are through embracing a new facet of stockmanship. NZFT2000 now makes the best of modern technology available in a "user friendly" form for the monitoring and benchmarking service for sheep farmers.

### **CONCLUSION**

NZFT2000 and its branches, now form a participating farmer-owned and directed non-profit organisation with the specific targets to greatly improve sheep farming profitability for individuals and the whole industry. The progress made so far has been successful, encouraging, and enthusiastic and it is now timely that the professional advisory, consultancy, and research sectors, as well as the governing organisations of the sheep industry, should critically examine the service NZFT2000 is providing and the potential it has for the whole sheep industry.