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Farmer experience of farm monitoring

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ABSTRACT

Farm monitoring has played a key role in the dramatic increase in our farm production since 1995/96. Through farm monitoring we are now much more aware of the current performance levels of our flock. The basis for decision making has been greatly improved by having more factual information on livestock performance. Androvax and crossbreeding have been identified as the means to rapidly improve our lamb production.

Keywords: Sheep; monitoring; crossbreeding; profitability

INTRODUCTION

We farm 249 hectares of north-lying faces of rolling to steep country at 460 metres above sea level, north of Heriot in West Otago. In 1996, we were suffering from high indebtedness (and still are) and a very inconsistent average to poor production with a 105-116% lambing. In 1995/96 the average lamb carcass weight was 13.5 kg, averaging \$32.50.

MONITORING WITH CF2000

Early in 1996, the Clutha Agriculture Development Board sent a circular to farmers in the area offering to put together a package that could ultimately lift farm production through monitoring and form a large database that could be used to benchmark production with the aim of lifting participating farmers' profitability nearer the top 25% of farmers in the Clutha district.

The proposal seemed to be exactly what we needed to help achieve the goals we had set in an effort to get out of the fix we were in. We were doing no monitoring at all and needed a big push to do it. When Allan Shaw's information package arrived in the mail we filled in the form and returned it the next day.

PERFORMANCE BENEFITS THROUGH CF2000

The lamb carcass weights increased to 14.7 kg in 1996/97, averaging \$41.30 (107% lambing), and further increased to 16.0 kg in 1997/98, averaging \$39.80 (121% lambing). In 1998/99 the lambing had increased to 130%. We can attribute our increase in production to the monitoring and benchmarking and workshops after joining CF2000.

For us, CF2000 had an effect similar to the introduction of GST. Following the introduction of GST, once a month all accounts were paid and the return put in, which made us financially aware of our situation. A cash book followed, and regular budgeting. Now with CF2000, each time stock are in the yards a sample are weighed and recorded. Thus, we are very aware of our present position

and can compare one month or one year with another. It is now very simple to see whether or not we are making progress.

There was a time when one could make more than just the odd uncalculated mistake without greatly affecting the bottom line. However, these days margins are so tight we can not afford even the slightest error of judgement. Each decision has to be based on factual information, not on the basis of gut feelings or that because it had worked that way last year it should work again. The only way we can get that information is to measure, monitor and benchmark. Dairying is doing it extremely successfully and so can sheep and beef farmers.

CHANGES AS A RESULT OF CF2000

Too often at times such as mating, we think the ewes look good, are content that flushing has gone well and are satisfied that the rams have done their job. This is followed by kind winter conditions and we settle into what we think should be a good lambing, only to be disappointed. We have learnt through CF2000 that mating weights start at lambing. By monitoring ewe weights through lamb drenching, weaning, pre-flushing, pre-mating, scanning and spring ensures that we can calculate our lambing success, or demise, accurately and there are no surprises or disappointments. Consequently, we can make good financial decisions based on historical, factual information that is reasonably accurate.

Some farmers are lucky enough to be born with a "stock sense" and "stockmanship" and achieve excellent results without monitoring or benchmarking, but unfortunately for a good number of us, no matter how hard we try, we just do not make it. CF2000 cannot replace good "stock sense" but it goes a long way to providing a sound base from which to make informed profitable decisions.

Having changed our attitude, we no longer focus narrowly on Romney and Southdown sheep, Angus and Hereford cattle, swedes and hay. Our farm has got to make a profit, and there is no room for sentiment and tradition either in livestock or systems. Some of us are sticking with

the traditional system of farming that has been used for the last 10-20 years because it has been successful in the past and we are waiting for the cyclic up-turn in beef and wool again. As a consequence, one of two things is happening. Either our equity or our farm fertility and maintenance is eroding away.

Breeding management

Monitoring ewe weights and benchmarking showed that our low ewe fertility was due to genetic factors and not, as we had thought for a very long time, due to our management. To correct this, we needed to look at where we were at. We have about 10 years of farming left in us, or maybe less the way things are turning out this year! It takes a minimum of between 5-7 years, probably longer, to upgrade a flock from a low genetic base within a breed. We have opted for the quick-fix crossbreeding method using East Friesian and Texel rams. To speed up the process, we decided to use Androvax on all the ewes. The aim is to progressively reduce the number of ewes treated as each year a new crop of crossbred two-tooths enters the flock. Androvax gave us a lift in lambing in the first year of about 13%, and 22% in the second year based on a previous average of 108%.

Spring hogget management

Having to achieve target weights for our hoggets, especially in spring and early summer under our present system, did not work. During lambing, hoggets were rotated on the lighter, low fertility, rougher area of the farm. In order to get better growth rates, we started scanning the ewes, and selected the best and flattest most exposed area and made that the hogget rotation block. Single-bearing ewes were put on the old hogget area, and because it was all gullies and inaccessible for a lambing beat, lambing rounds ceased. Ewe deaths were higher in this area, as was the incidence of wet-dries. Despite this, our overall lambing percentage increased, as did the hogget growth rates, and the hoggets were easier to shift because they were far more accessible.

BENEFITS OF THE MONITORING GROUP

We have already built up three years of very valuable information and it is absolutely vital that we continue, because otherwise we would never know if we were continuing forward, standing still or slipping slowly back again.

Discussion with other members at workshops and meetings, as well as having motivated and enthusiastic advisors involved at every opportunity exposes every member of the group to current district and national problems. This opens up a whole host of opportunities to debate and helps set our future direction.

Benchmarking makes us aware of where we are at in the whole scheme of things. Without this we do not know whether or not there is scope to do any better.

When a farm advisor is needed to come onto the property to help with a problem, a huge amount of information is already in place from which he/she can draw on to make accurate and meaningful advice without having to spend years getting a feel for the operation.

CONCLUSION

CF2000 offers a 'core' and 'optional' input form. From the optional input one can choose how much of a monitoring workload can be handled. Obviously, the more information gathered, the more beneficial to the business. At present we only carry out the core monitoring package because we have achieved good results and this fits our workload. Based on our experience over the last three years, we thoroughly recommend CF2000 to all farmers, as it is definitely a huge help towards making farming profitable. Once the seasonal weather gets back to something that represents normality, monitoring will be of even greater benefit.