

Grain and Graze 2 Relative Advantage - Eyre Peninsula

What were we supposed to do?

Originally this component of the project was to deliver “Whole farm system forums” for mixed farmers. These systems forums were to be based on farmer discussion groups but with the intent of answering whole farm systems questions farmers have on specific topics e.g. fitting livestock into no-till systems. What do we know, what do we need to find out? In reality, the forums were very sheep focussed – almost all attendees were mixed farmers, but were readily able to access cropping information, and were keen to develop the livestock components of their business. Access to livestock information had been limited in the past.

What did we actually do?

In March 2011, 4 sheep forums titled ‘More Profit, Less Hassle’ were held for growers on Eyre Peninsula. A guest speaker from outside the region was used to generate interest in the forums (Bob Hall, WA), and the events were widely advertised using ag bureau networks, newspapers, radio and electronic distribution lists. Consequently the forums were well attended.

From these events, interest was gauged for the formation of ‘Sheep Groups’, with 4 groups being established at Cummins, Buckleboo, Poochera and Penong. Since then, 2 more groups formed around the Kimba and Lock districts. The Sheep Groups were coordinated and facilitated by Mary Crawford, Land Management Consultant with Rural Solutions SA. Members of the Sheep Groups are mixed farmers, and each group determined their own agenda for the coming year.

Sheep groups generally met 3 times a year, with the first meeting being a planning session with invited guest speakers, the second was usually a benchmarking session undertaken with Daniel Schuppan, Livestock Consultant with Landmark where growers compared their livestock production to each other and saw changes in their own business over time, and the third was a technical session, usually held in the field visiting grower’s properties.

The Sheep Groups explored a range of topics to improve production, profitability and sustainability. Items included animal health and nutrition, soil cover and health, feed availability, new sheep handling technology and innovations, grazing management, Australian Standard Breeding Values, grazing cereals and so on.

For all but one of the attendees, cropping was their dominant enterprise and all improvements or consideration for changes to the livestock enterprise were put through their personal cropping program filters before considering adopting a new practice.

Did it work?

In March 2013, 29 Sheep Group participants responded to a written questionnaire. They found the most useful components of being part of a Sheep Group were benchmarking their enterprise against others in the district; talking to other farmers in the district and presentations from a range of different speakers. Fifty eight percent of respondents had made changes to their sheep enterprise/s since they became involved in a sheep group. Those that had not made changes were generally members of the more recently formed groups.

Some of the changes people had made included changed shearing time, increased stocking rates, use of electric fencing, general planning and nutrition, planting feed early (e.g. barley for grazing), changed lambing time, fenced paddocks to better utilise feed and protect sandhills, improved weaner growth rates with higher protein supplements, improved fencing and watering systems, feed budgeting and condition scoring ewes. Being involved in a sheep group helped 83% make decisions about their sheep enterprise, and all of the respondents thought that Sheep Groups should continue in the future.

A further Sheep Group evaluation was carried out in September 2013. Sheep Group members were invited to provide feedback about how they think being involved in a Sheep Group has helped them improve their mixed farming business. Several local businesses provided prizes for the best responses, to encourage participation.

Some of the comments included:

- “Several decisions were made after our benchmarking meeting and one of them was to mate our ewes to type rather than age. The second decision was to try lambing a bit later...with far less mortality(and) as a result we should see a huge lift in our production with more wether lambs to sell and more young ewes to shear and breed from.”
- “The sheep group meetings allow us as members to see the plainest of terms, where our own operations sits compared to our surrounding neighbours. We receive a quantitative figure, and no mistake can be made as to how we are performing. It is a safe, confidential environment, which facilitates discussion that delves quite deep into some producers systems, a depth which wouldn't be reached in general discussion over a beer at the local. The group meetings highlight the top producers, who we can then delve into what they may be doing differently to gain this edge.”
- “Planting early feed has saved us time, through shortened hand feeding. It has saved us money, because we need to hand feed less. We are now losing less condition from the sheep as a result of this and consequently growing more wool from healthier ewes and lambs, resulting in favourable financial outcomes. The costs are mainly fuel and labour, and these don't compare to the gains we receive as a result of doing it, not to mention the peace of mind we get from having the sheep on decent feed.”
- “Before we started benchmarking two years ago I had no idea how the sheep enterprise on our mixed farm was performing. After two years of data I now know that there is plenty of room for improvement and I now have a clear plan to make the enterprise profitable into the future. The two key areas I identified for improvement were to improve wool cut and to try and run more sheep through better grazing management.”

- “Through the sheep group and EPNRM I applied for funding to make a central water year and a dividing fence to make four 100 hectare paddocks to be able to rotational graze and help prevent erosion on sand hills. This project has allowed me to run more sheep in a more environmentally friendly manner and has been so successful it has inspired me to re-fence and add more troughs to other areas of my farm to be able to graze sheep in individual paddocks which I am in the process of doing now.”

Benchmarking undertaken by the Sheep Group members has been seen as very beneficial. Many producers in the groups commented that it was good to improve their understanding of their sheep enterprise and get a handle on what their sheep enterprise is returning on a \$ per DSE and \$ per winter grazed hectare (\$/WG ha) basis.

The variation observed between producers within the same rainfall environment provides opportunities for producers to be more productive and profitable. Producers can control the areas where the largest variations occurred including sheep losses and marking percentages. There were some small variations in sheep sale price, wool price and kg of wool/DSE. The big influence on gross margin per ha was the stocking rate, which influenced the number of lambs per ha and the wool production per ha. Therefore pastures, grazing management, animal health and genetics are the keys to optimising income from the sheep enterprise.

Risk management is also important and this will be determined by the management capabilities and the amount of risk that a producer is willing to take. The higher the stocking rate, the higher the risk and more management required. Some producers have low stocking rates as it makes it easier to get through the “poor season”. Many producers have an idea in their minds of what they will do in the “poor season” but there is no written strategy to implement ‘back door’ or exit strategies.

Some producers have started to implement changes to their enterprise after the first year of benchmarking their sheep enterprise. These changes have resulted in an improvement in their second year figures. The changes included improving pastures, monitoring ewe condition score and focusing on genetic improvement. The local information from the group allowed these producers to focus on targets that are being achieved in their own district and give them confidence to implement the change as they have the support of the local group members and advisors.

What were the keys to success?

Funding for the operation of the Sheep Groups was provided by EP Grain & Graze 2, SheepConnect SA and the Eyre Peninsula Natural Resources Management Board. This was a very important collaboration as the pooled funds provided flexibility (Sheep Group members were able to determine their own agendas), a greater number of serviced groups and greater ability to attract professional support.

Having someone specifically charged with organising the meetings (and adequately resourced) was crucial – a lot of time is needed to follow up phone calls, emails and towards the end SMS use, to ensure good attendance at meetings. There is also follow up time required on technical questions either raised at the meetings or asked outside of the meetings, having time to respond to these is important for group support and technical credibility.

From our perspective we could develop relationships with the farmers and gain a better understanding of their interests and issues as opposed to field days and workshops where we “drive in and drive out” not knowing if we are making giving the right messages, and not being able to follow up with farmers after they go home.

What could we have done better/do differently next time?

Providing a range of different speakers for the meetings kept growers interested and engaged, the use of the same people, although building a relationship, meant some growers became bored or keen to hear someone else, which can be difficult given a limited amount of local expertise.

Making sure everyone that wants to be involved has a working email address (yes, this is still an issue) and set up an SMS reminder service early on to save time chasing people to come to meetings. An early idea was to develop local ‘champions’ to be group contacts, to save the facilitator having to do all the work. Where these champions were established, the groups were very successful with high attendances and limited extra organisation required. It was very noticeable where there were no active champions to rally the groups.

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Photos:



Lock Sheep Group members attending an electric fencing demonstration, 2013.



Growers practicing taking pasture cuts for biomass estimation, 2013.



Daniel Schuppan, Landmark helps Poochera Sheep Group members undertake benchmarking of their livestock enterprises, 2013.