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Using sheep weights to help make management decisions

Overview

This case study showcases the on-farm value of embracing new technologies, including the use of sheep autodrafters and scales. This case study features Queensland producers, Graham and Jan Chambers.

Producer

Graham and Jan Chambers, Glenelg Station, near Mungallala, Queensland

Enterprise type

Predominantly Merino sheep

Land size and type

4,046 hectares

Flock size

4,500-5,000 Merino sheep, goats as well

Buying an autodrafter

Youth is wasted on the young, and after almost four decades on their Merino sheep property near Mungallala, husband and wife duo Graham and Jan Chambers wish they had their 'old' bodies back, especially when it's time to draft.

"The big wethers, when you're drafting them manually, they can come at a fairly hectic pace and can also come at any height. They can be a bit daunting and cause a bit of injury," Jan laughs.

It takes its toll when running a flock of almost 5,000 sheep and gets harder each year.

If you ask Graham how long they have been on Glenelg, you'll get a wry but good-natured "forever" in return. A fair enough response when he's lived and worked there most of his life.

"His father bought it in the 1970s, but it wasn't until we got married that we settled here. So, we've been here – God, what is it? – 38 years. We've not been here the full 50," Jan says.

Born and bred in Mungallala and Mitchell, the Chambers' have seen – and stuck through – all the booms and busts of the wool industry in that time.

They're only in their 'later 50s', but the couple hope to almost indefinitely extend their working life on-farm. Key to that longevity, they say, is embracing new technology.

"We don't plan on going anywhere in retirement. We plan to keep doing this until we can't any longer, I suppose," Graham says.

"It's all about making life easier for us so we can do this for another 15 or 20 years. You can't stay in the past and go backwards, it doesn't work. With electronic tagging it's only going to be a matter of years before it becomes compulsory, so you've got to embrace it."



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Benefits

So, they invested in an autodrafter with built-in sheep scales. Used to sort sheep into weight lines to optimise growth and slaughter schedules, the sheep handling equipment reduces labour needs and increases efficiency.

Full of praise, knowing what they do now, if their Te Pari-built autodrafter was available any sooner, Graham and Jan would have bought it.

“It’s great technology,” Graham says simply.

“We went to a field day at Goondiwindi, and we’d borrowed a different version from a neighbour and used it for one draft. We did some research beforehand and we went with the permanent mountable version.

“The drafter was about \$20,000. We built a big shed over the top of it. We already had an undercover sheep handling area and we just extended that over the top of it.”

The autodrafter not only makes things easier but has given greater flock insight both on-farm and also when heading to auction.

The Chambers only bought the autodrafter two years ago – just before the pandemic struck – so it is still too early to put a dollar figure on returns, but they say it is on its way to being a crucial part of business planning and profitability.

“If you can balance up whether you want to go to meatworks or you can put them on Auctions Plus, you’ve got an idea once you really know the weights of them and what your options are to sell them,” Jan says.

A worthwhile investment that has made life easier, albeit a little slower.

“The actual feed in process is a lot less stressful. We’ve got a good lead up to the drafter and they flow through really well. So, as far as the penning up and all that, it’s a far simpler process than what it is doing the manual draft. You’ve just got to allow yourself more time,” Jan says.

“If it’s a simple manual draft, we can probably put 1,500 sheep through the race in an hour, whereas with the autodrafter, the fastest we can get is probably about 400. So, it is a slower process. It’s just the time it takes for the drafter to recognise it, read the tag, weigh it and put it out,” Graham adds.

“There’s no way you can speed that up. It takes a certain time for all that to happen.”

“Until the sheep start running through it more and more often, they might jump off it quicker, but sometimes they stand there a bit confused and all that slows it down slightly.



Graham and Jan Chambers (Photo supplied by producers, credited to Queensland Country Life)



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As technology advances and both operators and animals become accustomed to new practices, the speed will naturally improve. So – as Jan notes – this added time is something they simply need to factor into their day for now.

Their only frustration with using this technology is a reliance on connectivity. This is not an issue unique to their operation; rural and regional communities continue to be beleaguered with poor internet and mobile service. Many autodrafters need 4G internet to operate at optimum capability.

“The problem is, we’re on 3G, so it can fluctuate and not be good at some points of the day,” Jan says. “We couldn’t do upload and download to the cloud, and so we couldn’t have all the information back up in the office. But we’ve got that all sorted now and that’s starting to work.

“It is something we can get more out of. Each time we’re getting better at what we do. We’re learning to ‘drive the scale box’ so to speak, as to what we want to get out of the sessions and what we need to put in to do the different drafts, particularly when we do a female/castrate draft on weaners.”

Things are easier and they now have the last three years of electronic tags digitally stored – critical to long-term business management.

Using new technology

Graham and Jan did their research before buying their autodrafter. The field day they attended at Goondiwindi was run by Leading Sheep. In an evolving market, the field day gave them the chance to not only ask questions and shop around but see the technology in use before buying. “It did give us the opportunity to look at that [new technology], whereas we hadn’t had that experience previously,” Jan says.

They also spoke to their neighbours and other primary producers about their experiences using autodrafters. As advocates for networking to advance their operations, Graham and Jan even hosted the More Lambs, More Sheep event at their property in April 2019.

“It is important that you do, even if it’s an informal setting in just talking to your neighbours or other like-minded producers, chatting about what you do and how you do it,” Jan says.

Final word

Experience is a valuable thing, especially on the farm. Graham and Jan have seen wool prices crash, drought and the industry evolve through the turn of the century.

“From the ‘70s through to the ‘90s or even 2000s, there probably wasn’t a lot of change in technology. You just built your yards a bit better to make everything work. But in these last 20 years, we’ve seen greater use of electronic technology start to come in,” Graham says.

For Graham and Jan, it’s a no-brainer to buy into technology. And they’ll be able to keep doing what they love for longer – and more easily – because of it.

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