

The Maidens Monitor (October–November 2023)

The Making Maidens Weight Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) is exploring ways to improve lamb marking rates from maiden ewes in central west Queensland. Conception rates of maidens in the region are generally good, however, converting these foetuses to lambs remains a challenge. Demonstration properties are exploring condition scoring, weighing, supplementation, scanning and udder assessment of ewes to improve their marking percentage. As part of this, demonstration sites are collecting individual animal data with electronic identification (eID) in large-scale, commercial operations and highlighting how this data is useful for decision making.

How are we using WhatsApp

Producers have been using a WhatsApp chat to discuss fertility and management of their flocks, learning from other producers and engaging in discussion with NSW Department of Primary industries sheep reproduction scientist Dr Gordon Refshauge. This bi-monthly update will summarise key topics of discussion from the PDS and WhatsApp chat.

Demonstration site – Beaconsfield

Beaconsfield has been testing the benefit of providing favourable treatment to low body condition score (BCS) ewes and underweight maidens prior to joining. Ewes were condition scored (yellow tag, 2021 drop) or weighed (red tag maidens, 2022 drop) in early September with a proportion of lighter ewes fed approximately 350g/hd/day of whole cottonseed for the two months prior to joining.

Weighing before joining showed that lighter fed ewes put on an average weight of 6.2kg (red tags) and 6.7kg (yellow tags). In both groups, the lighter ewes that were fed are now just a couple of kilograms lighter than the heavy unfed ewes. Pregnancy scanning will be done in early 2024. It will be interesting to see whether feeding has had a positive effect on scanning percentage.

Tag colour	Treatment group	Average weight prior to joining (kg)	Average weight at joining (kg)	Average increase (kg) and average daily gain (g/hd/day)
Red	Below joining weight, fed	39.4	45.6	6.2 ADG: 104
	Below joining weight, unfed		40.7	1.3 ADH: 20
	Heavier ewes, unfed	48.5	48.8	0.3 ADH: 5
Yellow	Low condition score, fed	44.9	51.6	6.7 ADH: 104
	Low condition score, unfed		47.5	2.6 ADG: 42
	Heavy condition, unfed	52.4	53.3	0.9 ADH: 14

Figure 1: Beaconsfield data collected before and after joining following different supplementation treatments



Image 1: Beaconsfield’s lower body condition score yellow tags after shearing. A proportion of this group were fed for two months prior to joining with the aim of increasing scanning percentage.

Topics of discussion in the chat

A big question that emerged from the chat was around the feasibility of supplementing low BCS ewes and lightweight maiden ewes to increase bodyweight before joining and therefore increase scanning percentage. If ewes are required to put on significant condition to reach target BCS or standard reference weight, what are the financial impacts of supplementing up to that level compared to allocating lighter ewes to a paddock with better feed? Many factors will play into this, including supplement cost, amount required to supplement, length of supplementation, ability to efficiently weigh or BCS ewes and ability to practically manage different treatment groups.

The discussion progressed to breeding for high body condition ewes in favour of feeding light ewes, coming full circle to emphasise the importance of assessing for multiple traits before culling. If you'd like to go back to the chat to find out how other producers make decisions in this space and what additional things they could consider, scroll up to the discussion on 4 October 2023. To join the WhatsApp discussion chat please contact Millie Sheales, details below.

Pick of the producer questions

How long does it take for ewes to dry up post weaning?

From Dr Gordon Refshauge's experience, it takes at least three weeks for ewes to dry up post weaning. However, nutrition and demand influence lactation, with milk production reduced when demand drops and pasture quality declines. Check the ewes' udders for any sign of milk production to confirm lactation status.

Key take-homes

Remember to inspect rams in the lead up to joining.

Just as ewe body condition score is correlated to fertility, so too is the performance of rams. Sperm

takes seven weeks to mature. In poorer conditions, rams will benefit from supplementation leading up to joining.

The target condition score for rams at joining is 3.5. Check for the 5 Ts: teeth, toes, testes, tackle and torso. Conduct checks early so you have time to supplement or add to your ram team before joining. See this Australian Wool Innovation resource for a refresher → wool.com/on-farm-research/rams.

Recording data against the eID tags made management easier at Beaconsfield.

Different treatment groups within the same age group (e.g. high BCS and low BCS unfed) could be run in the same mob for joining and separated out easily when required. Beaconsfield captures this data on the eID tags by use of a wand reader and the data is downloaded to an excel file for analysis.

Upcoming events

Leading Sheep Forum, Longreach – Friday 22 March 2024

More information: leadingsheep.com.au

Register here: trybooking.com/CONGV



Image 2 Peter Thomas discussing the PDS and demonstration site activities at the AgForce North Annual Forum in Longreach in November 2023.

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