



National flock – the future hangs in the balance

The size of the national sheep flock is dwindling as many producers make the switch from wool to cropping and meat production, and the debate is on as to what the future holds for the sheep industry as a whole.

The national flock – currently estimated at 71.6 million – is lower than it has been for more than 100 years.

Industry experts agree on the reasons causing the decline, but not all agree on the way forward.

The Future Farm Industries CRC Board recently convened to hear what the experts had to say on this pressing matter and considered the various views in order to determine the best future research direction.

Determining factors

During the past 20 years sheep numbers have steadily declined as prices plummeted during the offloading of the wool stockpile. This shift away from sheep has been exacerbated by high returns for other commodities, such as grain.

The final straw has been widespread drought – growers have not wanted to pay high feedgrain prices to feed sheep that bring low returns.

key points

- Sheep numbers on a national scale are plummeting and increased productivity rates and reduced turn-off are needed to stabilise the flock
- Strong commodity prices for grains, meat and live sheep exports have exacerbated the decline in sheep numbers
- A longer-term focus will remind producers that pasture and livestock remain key drivers of whole-farm profitability.

Shift in focus

One shining light for stalwart producers has been the increasing prices for lamb and live sheep exports. While this has bolstered returns for remaining sheep producers it is putting further pressure on flock numbers as marking percentages are not keeping pace with turn-off (see Table 1).

A number of strategies are possible to arrest the decline, including lifting reproduction rates (marking percentages), retraining ewes longer (including cross-breeds), and reducing turn-off.

It is here that the debate heats up.

Meat and Livestock Australian predictions suggest the outlook for lamb and sheep meat will continue and the into cropping is already slowing.

Internal research by Landmark reveals that producer confidence towards sheep, regardless of the final commodity, still lags behind that of grain production. And while grain producers are currently keen to invest in new technologies to improve and expand their cropping businesses, sheep producers may not be quite so motivated to do so.

This could impact on the levels of adoption of new technologies aimed at boosting marking percentages.

Benchmarking data from private farm business consultants, Holmes Sackett supports the Landmark findings. They have observed that the intensification of sheep production is not occurring at a rate fast enough to compensate for producers making the shift to cropping.

Long-term focus

All the doom and gloom could be a tad reactive according to Future Farm Industries CRC Research Director Dr Mike Ewing.

Dr Ewing believes the recent significant shift to grain production is logical but possibly shortsighted. He suggests a longer-term focus is required.

As Dr Ewing points out, in contrast to the outlook this time last year, the current outlook for cereals is substantially depressed – the outlook for sheep is substantially better.

TABLE 1. Sheep balance sheet – 2008-09

Opening number of sheep	76.9 million
Per cent ewes	61%
Per cent ewes joined	80%
Marking percentage	85%
Lambs marked	32.0 million
Lambs slaughtered	20.8 million
Sheep slaughtered	11.3 million
Live exports	4.2 million
Total turn-off	36.3 million
Deaths on farm (1.4%)	1.1 million
Closing number of sheep	71.6 million
Source: Kimbal Curtis (DAFWA)	

He adds that forward-looking producers traditionally use the balance between livestock and cropping to minimise long-term financial risks and predicts there will be a natural adjustment back to livestock during the coming 12 months.

This strategy is supported by insights from whole-farm economic analyses developed through MIDAS modelling.

Research impacts

A mixed enterprise emphasis is fundamental to the work of the Future Farm Industries CRC. The CRC aims to have profitable options for farmers to invest in when market and climate conditions allow, but in turn, producers need to remember their key strength lies in their flexibility.

Mike reminds producers that perennial pastures and livestock, particularly meat production, remain key drivers of whole-farm profitability over the long term. 🌱

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Subtropicals set pace for rapid transformation

Subtropical pastures have transformed the landscape on Marty and Karen Brennan’s mixed farming property in northern NSW and Marty shares his enthusiasm about his productive perennials with Catriona Nicholls.

“We run a mixed farming enterprise where we crop on our most productive ground and have traditionally run sheep on the poorer country,” Marty said.

“Our pastures were a mix of lucerne and native grasses, but with increased dry seasons the lucerne just wasn’t coping. When the leaves fell to the ground, the soil was exposed to the heat during the dry summers.

Our native grasses just weren’t giving us any bulk feed and any carryover feed they had tended to be worthless without rain.

So we were looking for something that would boost our livestock production and give us better groundcover to prevent our soils from washing away during heavy storms.

Other local producers were having great success with subtropicals, so we thought it was worth giving them a go.

Getting started

After much procrastination we started off after the local Namoi Catchment Management Authority got some funding and we were away.

We sowed Katambora Rhodes, Bambatsi panic, ‘consol’ lovegrass and premier digit as a bare seed mix at 4 kilograms per hectare with 70 kg DAP fertiliser.

key points

- Subtropical pastures have transformed country that previously struggled to be productive
- Stocking rates have increased, run-off has reduced and soil structure has improved under the subtropical perennials
- Success with subtropicals relies on a change of mindset from set stocking to rotational grazing.

farm info.

Case study: Marty and Karen Brennan

Location: Boggabri, New South Wales

Property size: 1600 ha

Mean annual rainfall: 600 mm

Soils: Alluvial flats to heavier chocolate country and red gravel ridges

Enterprises: Sheep, cattle and cropping



Photos: Lester Thearle

Marty and Karen Brennan have been overwhelmed at how the subtropical grasses have revitalised land they previously considered to be their least productive paddocks.

We were a bit late sowing as we were still using conventional machinery and undertook a few preparatory cultivations to get the weeds under control first.

But after getting the pasture in between Christmas and the New Year, we were grazing it by February with sheep and cattle.

We were absolutely gobsmacked with what the paddock did – we started with our worst country and it just transformed it into some of our best feed in no time.

Spreading the benefits

Our next step was to sort out a bit of plan with how to bring the rest of the farm into subtropicals, while still coping our better country.

We’ve now got about 445 ha of subtropicals established and we’re working hard to match feed with stocking rates and water.

It’s bit hard to quantify, but we’ve certainly increased stocking rates with of the subtropicals.

We’ve also had to reduce the size of the paddocks to make the best use of the feed.

We had to install a reticulation system for stock water as their is no longer any run-off on the paddocks – it’s not a bad problem to have.

And we’ve seen a transformation in the soil – it now takes in the water easily, the organic matter created from the bulk of the feed is making an environment that allows the nutrient cycle to really get going.

Weed Risk Note: Future Farm Industries CRC advises farmers to be wary of not confusing ‘consol’ lovegrass with African lovegrass, which is a declared noxious weed in Australia.