

JOCK McLAREN, “NERSTANE”

WOOLBROOK, NEW SOUTH WALES

- COMMERCIAL MERINO OPERATION
- EVERY RAM IS SOLD WITH PERFORMANCE RECORDING INFORMATION AGAINST THE WHOLE DROP
- TESTING FOR FIBRE DIAMETER AND FLEECE WEIGHT COMBINED WITH VISUAL ASSESSMENT
- 60-70% OF “NERSTANE” CLIENTS NOW USE PERFORMANCE FIGURES IN SOME WAY TO MAKE THEIR PURCHASING DECISIONS

“With the amount of people that have left the industry in the last few years, that’s only going to reward the people who have stuck with it and the sooner we get the SGA single genetic database the better.”

Forty years of testing for fleece weight and fibre diameter has paid off in heavier fleeces and a 3.5 micron reduction for New England Merino mainstays, the McLaren family, “Nerstane”, Woolbrook, NSW.

Third generation woolgrower and Merino studbreeder, Jock McLaren says objective measurement has been part of the family business since the 1960s.

“My grandfather was testing wool in a time when visual assessment was the only way people knew,” Mr McLaren said.

“He was way ahead of his time and knew that if you wanted to progress you had to measure because you need figures to prove that you’re getting somewhere.”

The McLarens, including Jock’s father John and brother Hamish, run 10,000 Merino sheep and 500 Hereford, Angus and Charolais breeders on their 2,835 hectare property.

They have resisted the widespread move into beef and prime lambs, citing a bright future for those who stick with wool into a new era of genetic gain and objective measurement.

The “Nerstane” operation began with a 22-micron flock and the challenge has been to meet client needs by bringing down the micron without losing frame and woolcut.

“Nerstane” also has the ability to catch the judge’s critical eye in the show ring and this year took home the Sydney Royal Show broad ribbon for Supreme Merino.

Mr McLaren attributes the family’s success in applying objective measurement to concentrating on just two important traits and retaining visual assessment as an

important part of the selection process.

“Visual assessment is still more than 50% of the process and the figures can sometimes be surprising, so you override them – that happens regularly here.”

He is confident in the value of objective measurement, however, and says young, educated people will drive the industry into a new age where a single genetic database such as SGA is the first step in the selection of breeding stock.

He estimates 60-70% of “Nerstane” clients now use performance figures in some way to aid their purchasing decisions.

“Every ram is sold with performance recording information against the whole drop and we go an extra step and put sires in sire trials against other studs so they are benchmarked against the industry.”

Having grown up weighing fleeces and micron testing, Mr McLaren sees no reason to be daunted by the new practices and information technology.

Data records begin at weaning when 800-1,000 ram lambs and 2,000 ewe lambs are shorn and each group is treated identically: all ewes are run as a mob on natural pastures and all rams are grazed on crops and fed.

At 18 months of age, carrying nine months’ wool, the young sheep are shorn again, their fleeces weighed and tested for micron, yield and other attributes.

This information goes to Advanced Breeding Services at Orange where the animals are ranked and information processed according to performance on the McLaren’s chosen traits of fibre diameter



and wool cut. The information comes back in terms of a “dollar production index” and a ranking for each animal.

“The beauty of having all your data and indices presented every year is tracking what you’re doing so you can actually see what you’re achieving,” Mr McLaren said.

A laptop computer has become a fixture in the “Nerstane” sheep yards during classing when individual animal figures are accessed and used as a selection tool along with visual selection.

Although 32 year-old Jock McLaren has seen the wool industry peak and trough during his working life, he is confident there is a bright future for the “fantastic fibre”.

“Like any commodity, wool is going to have its ups and downs and provided we can promote wool and get people wearing it, it’s got to have a future because it’s natural and the world’s going greener and greener.

“With the amount of people that have left the industry in the last few years, that’s only going to reward the people who have stuck with it and the sooner we get the SGA single genetic database the better.”