

WES KEMBER, "GLEANEITH PARK"

GANMAIN, NEW SOUTH WALES

- PRIME LAMB OPERATION AND BORDER LEICESTER STUD
- GENETICS AN IMPORTANT TOOL TO USE IN COMBINATION WITH TRADITIONAL, VISUAL METHODS
- SHEEP SELECTION BASED ON WEANING RATES, MILKING ABILITY AND GROWTH RATE
- BORDER LEICESTER WEANING RATES NOW 150% AND MERINO 100%

"For sheep, it's only logical to incorporate LAMBPLAN and the Merino Genetics Services into the industry-wide database SGA."

You may as well feed a good sheep as a bad one, according to Wes Kember, and for un-seen traits in particular he sees genetic evaluation as the way to ensure there are no bad'un's.

Mr Kember operates a prime lamb operation along 'classic' lines in the northern Riverina sheep/wheat belt country near Ganmain. A 1,500 head flock of large framed Merino ewes is run and these ewes are joined with Border Leicester rams to produce the first-cross ewe flock. These in turn are joined with Poll Dorset sires to produce the prime lambs.

"Gleaneith Park" also produces winter cereals, beef cattle and is host to a small piggery.

To provide more control over the genetic make-up and hence productivity of the first-cross dams, Mr Kember also runs his own Border Leicester stud – based on 400 ewes. Some of the rams from this flock are sold, the balance are used on-farm.

Mr Kember says any rams that are brought in from outside studs are carefully vetted for their biological value.

"We buy and use rams in the top 20% of the breed according to the LAMBPLAN estimated breeding values to ensure we're moving forward genetically.

"I believe in using all the tools available to get the best out of our flock, and there are some traits that don't show up in visual evaluation," Mr Kember said.

"The keys to profitability for us are weaning rates, milking ability and growth rate, and they are all breeding values we can get from LAMBPLAN.

"The thinking behind that order of priority is that we want the ewes to have as many lambs as possible, then they must properly

rear all their lambs, then the lambs need to grow as fast as possible to go off into the market," he said.

As a result of his selection programmes, Mr Kember says lambing rates have increased considerably, even though his commercial flock is all paddock reared and run.

The Border Leicester stud weaning rate now sits at 150%, and Mr Kember is disappointed if he doesn't get 100% from the Merino ewes and 125% with the first cross ewes.

"The cattle industry's been using breeding values for years, and I can't see why any cattle producer would spend so much money buying bulls without having good figures to check them off against.

"And for sheep, it's only logical to incorporate LAMBPLAN and the Merino Genetic Services into the industry-wide database SGA," Mr Kember said.

"The uptake of genetic evaluation needs to increase for sheep too, especially now lamb prices have jumped to another level and the industry's become more attractive.

"For the guys moving into the industry, it's important to decide which markets they're going to target, and aim for those traits and weights."

Mr Kember has been using LAMBPLAN in his Border Leicester stud operation for ten years, and he is also involved in the Super Border\$ group of breeders.

Mr Kember is also looking forward to the introduction of SGA.

SGA will deliver, among other things, a common national language for genetic evaluation known as ASBVs, which will only be used where sufficient linkages exist to ensure accuracy.



There are a large number of traits that have a commercial impact, including wool, growth, carcass, internal parasite resistance and reproduction which will all be evaluated by SGA.

"The new system will bring even more benefits to the industry, and I hope it will encourage even greater use of genetic evaluation," Mr Kember said.

"Genetics will never take over completely from traditional, visual methods, but it's an important tool to use in combination.

"We only choose animals that have a sound structure and look good. Then we compare figures to get a sense of their past and likely future performance in those traits we want to improve," Mr Kember said.

The SGA database will be able to produce trait leader summaries, but breeders involved in the system will have full control of whether their individual data is publicly available.

It is hoped that by 2010 the majority of both Merino and meat sheep breeds will be evaluated through SGA.