PHILIP RUSSELL, "CLIFTON"
BROOME HILL, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

- SHEEP CLASSER AND SOUTH AFRICAN MEAT MERINO SHEEP (SAMM) STUD
- USES OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT WITH VISUAL APPRAISAL
- REDUCED FLEECE MICRON FROM 23-26 TO 20-21 OVER EIGHT YEARS
- INCREASED FERTILITY AND IMPROVED NUMBERS OF LAMBS WEANED PER EWE
- RAPID INCREASES IN GROWTH RATES AND EYE MUSCLE AREA, REDUCED FAT COVER

"I think the ASBVs will take industry to another level, as they'll take the guesswork out of indexing and selecting stock."

With a watchful eye on two industry sectors, sheep classer and South African Meat Merino sheep (SAMM) breeder Philip Russell is well placed to observe the values of objective measurement in Australian sheep industries.

Mr Russell has been using objective measurement procedures on his stock and on his clients' stock for nearly 20 years, and has found it to be a valuable breeding tool.

"In my role as a classer, and prior to the Optical Fibre Diameter Analyser 2000 (OFDA 2000), I was simply using scales to measure body weight and recording that along with all the fleece data I could gather," he said.

"Currently I use the data collected from my Merino stud clients to monitor trends for body weight, micron, wool type, fleece weight and a host of other information to isolate different families within the stud.

"Gathering this level of data helps the studs to identify different traits in the families and decide which direction they would like those families to go genetically."

Through his work Mr Russell is finding ram buyers are increasingly demanding objective measurements to assist in their selection process, including body weight, micron, clean fleece weight and coefficient of variation.

As for his own stock, Mr Russell has seen direct benefits from using breeding values and genetic data in the selection of his own SAMM ewes and sires.

"The opportunity is there to make big gains from using objective measurements, though they are best used in conjunction with traditional visual appraisal methods," Mr Russell said.

"We've been able to increase growth rates, increase eye muscle diameter, reduce fat cover, increase fertility and improve the number of lambs weaned per ewe.

"And by using LAMBPLAN with our SAMMs we've been able to achieve those significant gains easily and quickly, which is extra important in establishing new breeds.

"I have also seen 23 to 26 micron-producing flocks lowered to 20-21 microns over an eight year period, without losing fleece weight and body weight!

"This means we can achieve far bigger returns per hectare, which is a great result for any producer," he said.

Mr Russell believes the introduction of SGA's single language ASBVs will benefit the entire industry, both commercial and stud breeders and buyers.

"Objective measurement is a great tool, and having worked with it for nearly 20 years I am fairly familiar with it, but even I am still learning all the time, though the principle is gaining such wide acceptance," Mr Russell said.

"I reckon something like 80% of my Merino clients are now using OFDA 2000 while they're classing; ten years ago maybe 5% of my clients were making those sort of measurements – that sort of uptake speaks for itself.

"Though I think the ASBVs will take industry to another level, they'll take the guesswork out of indexing and selecting stock.

"The ASBVs will also be a way to link Quality Assurance programmes that currently exist throughout the industry and guarantee Australian sheep meat and wool products."