

The Dohne Ewe – Maternal Breed of Choice

Best profits from sheep enterprises come from finding the right breed or breed combinations to achieve the desired product and market fit. Dohne ewes with their inbuilt qualities, characteristics and capabilities are gaining market share in both the Maternal and Self replacing scenarios.

Client experience has indicated how good the Dohne ewe is, even as a maiden. This is a combination of four great attributes of the breed: fertility, mothering ability, milking ability and docility.

The recent Lambex Conference in Adelaide in July 2014 emphasized the importance that overall weaned weight has as a profit driver. This a combination of weaning survival rate and average weaning weight. The Dohne ewe is renowned for her ability in both these areas. Lamb marking percentages of 116% have been reported in maidens. Observations about the quiet nature of young Dohne mothers and how this relates to lamb survival soon after birth have indicated that this is a contributing factor in successful mothering.



Registered Dohne rams all have Estimated Breeding Values for various production traits, these include MWWT. Sheep Genetics Australia, who process the raw data on all the registered Dohne sheep in Australia, provide EBV's for Maternal Weaning Weight (MWWT), which is an estimate of the female progeny's potential for milk production and ability to provide a better maternal environment. An example of this would be for a ram with MWWT of 2 to have daughters that raise weaners that are 1 kilogram heavier than the progeny of a ram with a MWWT ASBV of 0. (Half of an animal's genetics come from the Sire; therefore, half the breeding value also comes from each parent). Buyers can make confident decisions using the available data and values displayed. Remember, a ram has an influence in a breeding flock for

not just the four years of his productive life, but for the next ten, through his daughters and their daughters.

The extra value represented in the Dohne mother over the more traditional South Australian terminal lamb mother, a Merino, has been measured in the public sale yard auction forum. A breeder presented Poll Merino and Dohne ewe hoggets as separate lots at a sale, and received a \$26 premium for the Dohne cross line of similar number. Other specialist prime lamb producers will only buy in Dohne maidens to feed their terminal cross program, by refusing to purchase Merinos to put to Poll Dorset or White Suffolk rams.

Through all of this, the Dohne still produces a fleece that commands a similar price per kilogram as the more traditional merino, with 18 to 21 micron wool having good staple strengths also, due to the breed's ability to forage well and convert feed to product. Breeders who have converted over from BL x Mo mothers by keeping the ewe hogget portion of the progeny from Dohne rams have consistently gained an 8 to 9 micron reduction in fibre diameter, with resulting increases in per kilogram prices for wool, in early 2014, this meant 180 c/kg, or about \$9 per head per year.

Fleece weight from a Dohne is unarguably lower than the traditionally available Merino strains, but because of the plain body and clean points that this brings, the resultant increase in weaning percentage is in the order of 30 to 40% according to the research data presented in the Industry funded Bred Well, Fed Well workshops run through the Making More From Sheep program. At any of the lamb and wool price scenarios of the last five years, clearly the economics lie in favour of the extra lambs weaned. Most sheep producers receive approx 70% of their income from sales of animals.

The top priced pen of BL first cross ewe lambs at the November 27th Mount Pleasant First Cross ewe sale in 2013 came from Dohne mothers. In the sale report in the following Stock Journal issue, the bloodline of the BL rams was listed, but these rams only contributed 50% of the genetics. The Dohne mothers also contributed 50% of the genetics, but 100% of the mothering ability and 100% of the milking ability that achieved the pleasing result for the vendor.

The Dohne ewe, being of a merino strain is not subject to the same seasonal breeding difficulties that other breeds have to contend with, they will conceive in spring for early lambing in areas where grass seeds may restrict the length of growing season available for finishing lambs.

The market place has truly recognized the value of the Dohne ewe as the new Maternal mother of choice, because as producers gain experience and make keen observations with these sheep, their confidence levels grow as the ewes prove their own capabilities.