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Dear Woolgrower

Greetings from the team at Connewarran. Well, nature has a way of humbling us. We don't want to dwell on the season past, but would be remiss to not acknowledge the genuine hardship that many of our clients, fellow woolgrowers, land, and animals have endured in recent months. On a brighter note, it is pleasing to see the exceptional prices that are currently on offer for sheep and lambs. We feel positive regarding the prospects for wool also.

At Connewarran, like many, we have just experienced our driest 24-month period on record by a considerable margin. Despite this, we engaged in minimal destocking and did not purchase hay. We simply pushed the system harder than we have ever done before, and probably harder than was advisable! The resilience of our animals was a marvel and the silver lining in the season is that it has redrawn the boundaries of what we understand to be possible with a Connewarran merino.

In this newsletter we share a little of what the past season has taught us, along with steps we are taking, and will take in the future, to continue to build an ever more resilient, plain, fine wool merino.



Connewarran stud ewes pre-classing 2024.

Benchmarking

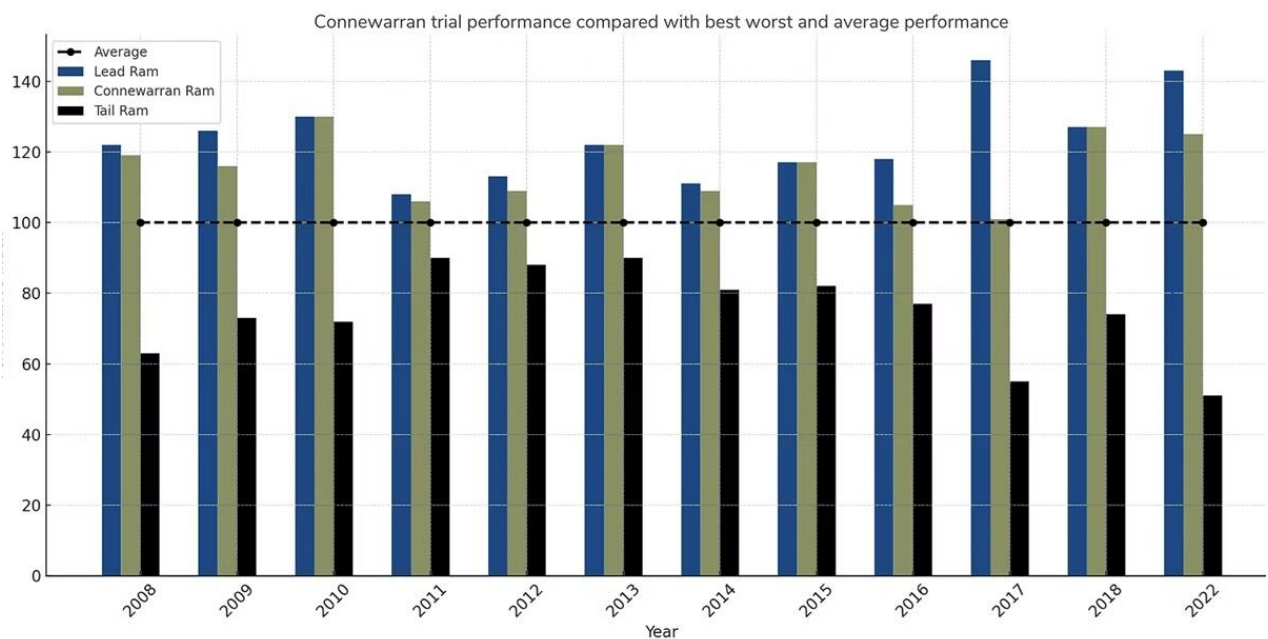
Sire Evaluation Trials. The Proof is in the Paddock.

We have a long-standing commitment to Australian Merino Sire Evaluation Trials. They represent real data, collected independently and transparently on real, commercial farms.

Our current entry is Connewarran 20297 at Balmoral for the 2024 drop. Early results suggest he may turn in another very satisfactory performance. He's showing up as being slightly plainer than the average with good wool characteristics; finer micron, very low fleece rot, outstanding staple strength, good character and low dust penetration.



Below is a graph summarising the performance of all Connewarran sires entered in trials since 2009. In football parlance, if you liken the top ram to a premiership, being above the dotted line as playing finals, and the bottom ram as the wooden spoon, then we think Connewarran has been a pretty good team to back over the years.



Research

We've had another busy year supporting industry research, particularly in the area of flystrike, working on two projects:

Flystrike Genomics:

Connewarran is one of 12 studs nationally to be working with AWI and AGBU to develop flystrike breeding values. We now have flystrike project breeding values for a range of our current sires and our sheep form part of the flystrike genomics reference flock.

This project is collecting data from struck animals and comparable animals that are not struck to create a Flystrike Project Breeding Value (PBV). The Flystrike PBVs have been created by combining old and current research data, recent on-farm information, and genomic testing.

The project requires a minimum strike threshold for the management group to be reached and thus requires us to withhold preventative treatments until this threshold has been met. It is effectively a stress test on the animals, similar to running them packed onto very short feed to get a worm egg count up or on very boggy ground to expose feet issues. The project has been extremely useful in helping us develop protocols which quantify the relative susceptibility or otherwise of sire progeny to flystrike.

More information: <https://www.wool.com/news-events/news/genomics/>

The Sheep Blowfly Trapping Project:

This project is trying to find variation in the microbiome on the sheep's skin and see if this can be linked to susceptibility to flystrike. Dr Maddie Bone and her team from Deakin University have now completed their second year of sampling at Connewarran and we look forward to seeing the analysis of results as they come in.

More information:

<https://www.wool.com/news-events/news/fly-traps/>



Breeding Update

On a selection of traits of interest to most woolgrowers

We aim to breed plain bodied, fine wool merinos which can handle dry or wet summers and cold, wet, windy winters. A sound, safe animal that allows woolgrowers to pull their key profit levers: high reproductive efficiency and strong wool returns with the necessary welfare attributes. We are constantly refining our approach to breeding. Our current actions regarding some fundamental traits of interest to most wool growers follows:

Lamb survival: Selecting to increase

Our aim is to maximise foetal survival in our challenging environment. The drivers of this are complex and multifactorial, but we focus on three key strategies.

- 1) Genotyping all sires and ET donor ewes for cold tolerance: This allows us to identify animals with a superior capacity to metabolise fat and release heat during periods of cold stress
- 2) Preferencing higher fat animals: Fat is needed to metabolise to cope with cold snaps. It's obviously also useful more generally
- 3) Direct selection evaluating both the sire and daughter effect: Our collection of full pedigrees allows us to quantify a range of indicators regarding lamb survival. These include net lambs weaned, total foetal survival rate, and twin survival rates.



A mis-muster. Eventually rectified but Hamish's 47 y.o. legs were weary!

Dag: Selecting to reduce

With our sheep now “plain enough” (see below) we are using selection pressure previously directed to breech wrinkle towards dag. We are operating on three levels:

1. Directly on the lambs in the late post weaning stage, removing any lamb with an unacceptable level of dag
2. On ewes at our annual classing, removing any ewe with an unacceptable level of dag
3. On sires according to the aggregated results of their progeny, removing any sire whose progeny are negative outliers on dag on an aggregated basis

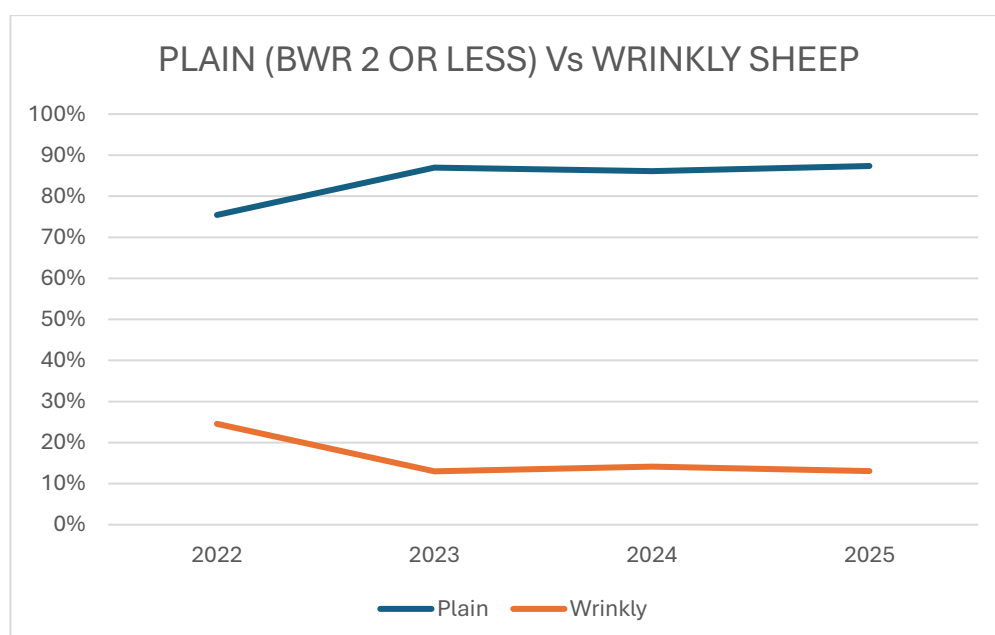
Wool quality and quantity: Selecting to maintain

In our environment, wool quality can't be compromised. Our on-farm experience and industry benchmarking tell us that we have sheep with highly functional fleeces and skins. We will continue to stabilise this trait by culling off-type animals.



Breech wrinkle (BWR): Selecting to stabilise

We've had a big push on this trait over the last decade and are now in maintenance mode. The most recent trial data had our entrant slightly below average for BWR. Our on-farm measurements have been relatively stable over the last 3 years with 86-87% of our lambs a breech wrinkle score of 2 or less. Whilst we'll continue to cull wrinkly outliers, generally we don't feel the need to plain our sheep further.



Systems for Turning Off Wether Lambs

With the current price of lamb at near record highs and wool, well, less so, there is scrutiny on turn off rates for wether lambs. In our business, we spring lamb and turn the best of our wethers off the following June. The balance go at around 12-13 months, as lambs, just before they cut their teeth. These lambs get two springs to grow through and produce one very high value fleece. It's easy, feed efficient, with peak lactation in spring, low risk, with good margins and balanced exposure to both the wool and lamb markets.

There are other options. One is to bring lambing forward to autumn to allow more time for lambs to grow. This is generally not considered a very feed efficient option. Another is to push the turn off date back into late summer or early autumn. The final variable is to select for higher growth rates in lambs. The table below summarises some lambing dates, turnoff dates, and the growth rates required to meet them.

Lambing date	Turn off date	Growth required	Margin for error	Feed efficiency	Wool return
April-May 2025	1/12/2025	215g/day	Moderate	Low	Moderate
April-May 2025	1/04/2026	166g/day	Moderate/High	Low	High
July - August 2025	1/12/2025	400g/day	Zero!	High	Very low
July - August 2025	1/04/2026	245g/day	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Aug- Sept 2025	1/12/2026	135g/day	High	High	High

When modelling wether lamb growth rates the impact on the animals that are left behind, the sisters and mothers, should be considered. In a fairly standard merino operation these ewes and ewe lambs will make up approximately 66-80% of the flock on a per head basis, much more on a per DSE basis. Typically speaking, high early growth rates are negatively correlated with most wool production traits and some longevity traits. Even in the current environment, and much more so in more favourable ones for wool, wool and longevity does still count. We would argue that if you don't care about wool, get rid of your merinos!

Flock profiles @ 100% lambing. Lambing as maidens. No deaths.					
13 month lamb. Per head basis.			Young lamb. Per head basis.		
	Ewes	Wethers		Ewes	Wethers
Ewes	33%		Ewes	40%	
13 m.o lambs/maidens	16.5%	16.5%	13 m.o lambs/maidens	20%	
Young lambs	16.5%	16.5%	Lambs	20%	20%
Total	66%	33%	Total	80%	20%

We feel that the current meat/wool price ratio is an outlier rather than a long-term shift in our markets. As such, we will continue to pursue a balanced merino with good, but not extreme, growth rates; one capable of adapting to the variable market conditions we graziers are consistently confronted with.

Data and Decision-Making

This year we will be increasing the depth of data we provide in our sale catalogue. We have provided Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) for 10 years now. Unfortunately, despite a measurement being taken, there are consistent gaps in ASBV data provided by Sheep Genetics. In the past, we have substituted a Flock Breeding Value (FBV) when an ASBV was not available. This approach provided “a figure”, but also complicated things as ASBVs and FBVs do not reconcile. So, this year, we’re quite simply going to provide both. We recommend clients use the FBV, contextualised by environmental information such as rear type, ewe age, and any (rare) management group variations, combined with a visual appraisal when making their selection decisions. If you have questions, please do ask!

Below is an example of the difference between ASBV’s and FBVs from the four rams we displayed at Bendigo and Sheepvention. Astute observers will find some significant re-rankings between ASBV and FBV data points, and perhaps question how they came about?

Ram	Birthdate	RT	Grp	Ewe age		Ywt	Yfat	Yemd	Ycfw
24007	1/05/2024	1	1	5	ASBV	6.3	1.2	1.3	12.3
					FBV	117%	111%	116%	126%
24036	15/05/2024	1	1	3	ASBV	3.5	-0.3	-0.6	22.6
					FBV	124%	156%	107%	171%
24198	15/05/2024	1	1	3	ASBV	1.75	-	0	-
					FBV	116%	133%	112%	123%
24238	25/05/2024	1	1	8	ASBV	5.8	-0.16	0.73	22
					FBV	136%	156%	132%	147%

There are a range of reasons why some sheep don’t end up with an ASBV for some traits. Usually, it relates to linkage. We breed our sheep to be the best **performing** sheep possible, rather than the best **figured** sheep possible. Sometimes this can lead us to use a ram that is “outside the system”. When we do so it usually results in no, or very poor, ASBVs. Not just for the immediate progeny, but for generations to come.

We would like to emphasise that our misgivings regarding ASBVs should not be mistaken for an opposition to measurement or quantification. In fact, we use a very large amount of objective data in our selection decisions. Our issue with ASBVs lies with the algorithm which interprets the data which is submitted to sheep genetics. This algorithm is a gross oversimplification of an inherently complex process, the splitting and recombination of the 26 chromosomes (plus the sex chromosomes) which make up the sheep genome. The process of recombination is inherently chaotic, with over 67,000,000 possible outcomes from chromosomal recombination alone! To simplify this to a single, rigid, formula with limited checks and balances can lead to very misleading outcomes.

2025: 10th annual ram sale

Despite facing plenty of seasonal challenges, this year's sale team are coming along nicely. We intend to offer 60 rams, approximately 50 poll and 10 horned, in our annual sale, with the majority being non-mulesed. The sale will be via helmsman auction using the Auctions Plus platform. Videos of the rams and wool photos will be on Auctions Plus approximately 2 weeks before the sale.

Wednesday 15 October, 2025

50 poll merinos. 10 merinos

To be sold on property via the helmsman system using the Auctions Plus platform

Most rams with NM status suitable for clients participating in accreditation schemes



Our entire 2025 drop/2026 sale offering has now been marked and are non-mulesed. The percentage of polls in our offering will continue to grow.

Wishing you all the best for the remainder of the season.

Hamish, Eli, Richard and Jenny Weatherly
Connewarran