



The Sheep's Back Case Study

Nathan & Wendy Brown

The Business of Sheep

Nathan & Wendy Brown – Boonoke West

“Changing perspective from farming sheep to managing a sheep business, that is profitable and benefits the mixed farm as a whole.”

When Nathan and Wendy Brown took control of the family business in 2000, they got to work revitalising the business, starting with the cropping system. Through training, advice from peers, industry experts and research they drove up the profitability of the enterprise. They then took these principles and management techniques and applied them to the sheep enterprise where, although they were already knowledgeable in operational techniques, there was a lack of knowledge in where the money was. Since changing to a business focus, sheep enterprise gross margins have doubled and operational efficiencies have improved greatly. Pasture has also gone from something that sheep eat to driving stocking rate and the cropping system.

The Browns manage approximately 5500ha over two properties in Jerramungup and Frankland River. They run a 50:50 sheep/ crop enterprise. Within the sheep operation they join 6700 ewes to Merino, 1300 culls/older ewes to terminal sires and run 5000 hoggets. They also

have a stud selling 60-70 rams through private selection each year.

When they took over the farm it was 60:40 sheep crop, however taking on quite a lot of debt at the same time they needed to improve the profitability fast. Nathan initially increased cropping area to 70%, reducing sheep numbers. He learnt from progressive local farmers and advisors that he needed to improve the timing of his spraying, plan ahead and upgrade machinery; investing in inputs in order to maximise outputs and profitability. Once the cropping side of the business started to improve, Nathan looked harder at the sheep and applied the same principles; investing in pasture, working to a plan with staff and investing in equipment to make management easier and more efficient.

The Sheep Journey

After increasing the crop program they retained too many sheep which led to high feed costs and poor lamb and ewe survival rates. “We weren’t running the sheep well”. This led to trying to make more from less, running a low stocking rate, aiming for a high wool cut per head and lambing in April targeting a higher price for heavier lambs. The income was great on a per head basis but when analysing the books at the end of the year they still

weren't making any money from the sheep.



The lambing percentage was still quite poor, sitting in the 70's. They got involved in a Life Time Ewe Management course and this led to a rude shock regarding how much feed/nutrition a lambing ewe required! Determined to improve sheep management they followed through with feeding rates and spent a great deal improving the autumn lambing percentage.

Following extensive research and discussion with an adviser, many options were looked at to fill the feed gap ranging from early sown grazing crops to whole system change. Finally the decision was made to change time of lambing from April to July (the stud is still early).

Changing the Whole System

Nathan's biggest learning curve for the sheep enterprise has been understanding stocking rates and their impact on profit. He transferred his understanding of an area based monitoring system from cropping to sheep. While April lambing, the stocking rate was 3.5-4 DSE/ha. Through changing time of lambing the stocking rate aim shifted to 5.5-6 DSE/ha. The shift in lambing date allows the ewes to get the most out of the pastures at the time of year most valuable to the stock - when they are lambing. This, coupled with pas-

ture improvements, allowed him to halve supplementary feed costs even though he had almost doubled the stocking rate. He has also reduced his joining period from 6 weeks to 5 weeks.

Investing in Efficiency

Changing the system is one thing but making it run efficiently still requires infrastructure and planning. Over the last few years the business has erected three sets of stock yards, renovated a shearing shed and annually puts up around 10kms of fencing. This allows the stock to be processed efficiently and ensures that boxing up of mobs is minimalised, which saves a great deal of time. The business also invested in a sheep handler several years ago, they now use it to jet, vaccinate, wean and weigh lambs. They also keep a hand piece handy for any cleaning up they need to do.



The business employs a stock manager who is solely focused on the sheep. This arose as the business felt that the sheep weren't being managed well enough, everything was "OK" but they were missing with timeliness of feeding, drenching, etc and there was quite a lot of missed production potential. This also led other management decisions not being made when they should be. After initial scepticism





from their advisor, the business demonstrated that increased productivity from better management did in fact more than pay for the full time position as well as the other management benefits.

A big part of having a successful stock manager is having a good plan for the year. Every January, Nathan goes through the plan for the whole year with the manager and they finish up with a calendar outlining what happens when. The manager can now prompt Nathan regarding upcoming issues rather than the other way around.

Pasture is the Backbone of the Whole Business

Nathan considers the pasture phase of his rotation to be the backbone of the cropping system as well as central to sheep management. He manipulates pastures early (using Targa MCPA), killing out brome grass, barley grass and cape weed but leaving rye grass as a feed base with clover. He considers rye grass to be relatively easy to kill before a cropping phase as it has a short flowering window so responds well to late spray topping, which also allows the paddock to have a longer growing season and more green feed for sheep. In order to protect his clover base, Nathan has not used any group B herbicides since 2004. He also spreads super in his pasture phase (super copper zinc moly), at 100kg/ha, which has made a big

difference to the clover and feedbase in general.

Nathan will also sometimes drill in barley and oats into clover to bulk them up, although he is aware of crowding out the clover. The goal at the end of the two year pasture rotation is to have a weed free, dense clover paddock that is low in disease and high in nitrogen form nodulation. "We have to get this right or put the next crop rotation in jeopardy".

The Future

As markets have changed, so to have the sheep crop mix. From a high of 70:30 when wool and meat were at their worst, the balance now sits a touch over 50% sheep. Over the last fifteen years, technology and markets have changed and Nathan has realised that keeping up to date, planning, investing in efficiency and monitoring his enterprises on a per hectare basis has allowed him to make changes progressively and keep moving forward.

Nathan believes "Successful businesses have processes and plans and make decisions that are not emotive. This is especially important when the farm gets bigger, as there's not enough time to look everywhere and make good decisions on the hop."

