

# Driving Fertility and Productivity

*Connecting people in the business of sheep*

## SNAPSHOT

Name:	Darren, Fiona and April Sanders, and Tas Hawthorn
Location	Coombe, SA
Enterprises	Merino Sheep and Lucerne seed
Farm size	840 hectares

### **Philosophy: 'benchmark production on profit per hectare not profit per animal'**

Focusing on fertility through ewe nutrition has been the key to driving productivity and profitability in the Sanders sheep enterprise. The aim is for a condition score target for ewes of CS3 plus. "Any ewes that are less than condition score 3 are run as a separate mob and managed to improve condition score. Prior to joining we only had 10 ewes that did not reach target condition scores" April said.

Lambing time has also been another key driver of productivity. Traditionally the Sanders lambed in May, but now lamb in July/August. The main driver of this was to lamb when feed availability was high to meet the requirements of the lactating ewes. This change has allowed an increase in ewe numbers from 1500 ewes to 2800 ewes. The aim is to increase ewe numbers a further 200, to 3000 ewes next year.

The feedbase on the Sanders property is 90-95% Lucerne. One third of the area is used for lucerne seed production under irrigation and the remaining two thirds for grazing. To increase feed availability the Sanders will often oversow dryland and irrigated lucerne with barley or rye. This also provides competition for grass seed plants and

provides additional feed that can be cut for hay and used in the containment pens.

The Sanders have minimal sheep health issues on their Lucerne based pastures. Sheep are not grazed on high risk pastures which is determined by leaf colour, growth stage and 3-4 weeks after irrigating. When introducing trading sheep to high quality lucerne pastures, hay is used to transition them on to the Lucerne feedbase. A customised mineral lick is offered to ewes and the Sanders have observed that intakes of this will vary depending on the quality of the feed on offer. The lick is offered during winter and spring leading up to and during lambing.

Containment feeding is a key management tool for the sheep enterprise and April says "it alleviates the stress of paddock degradation. "Containment feeding is undertaken for around 3-4 months (January to April. Irrigated pasture becomes available toward the end of April). Ewes are fed in containment when they are dry/early pregnancy while the requirements of the ewe are lower, and it allows for optimal carrying capacity during winter and spring. Matching high production and feed requirements during late pregnancy and lambing has helped drive profit. April says "containment feeding has taken the pressure off the farm particularly when we are closing areas for lucerne seed production at the start of December."

All ewes are pregnancy scanned. Ewes with multiples are allocated the better Lucerne based pastures. Generally the ewes scan two thirds multiples and one third singles. April says "we monitor and manage the Lucerne feedbase rather than supplementary feed with grain".

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April adds “no supplementary feeding means less disturbance and less mis-mothering.”

Supplementary grain is still sometimes used in low rainfall years. An average lambing percentage of 120% ewes joined is achieved. Ewe losses are minimal with a ewe death rate of less than 2%.



*Darren and Fiona Coombe*

Dry ewes are ear notched and removed from the flock if dry a second time. Lamb deaths are recorded. The focus for the 2020 lambing will be to also record causes of lamb death. Aprils says “this will further fine tune the system and help identify where the focus needs to be.”

The Sanders considered that moving lambing time away from the district ‘norm’ may increase their predation issues but were confident that this was generally one of the lowest reasons for lamb deaths in their area. However predation management is still regarded as necessary with baiting for foxes occurring 4-6 weeks before lambing commences.

The change in lambing time has meant a new vigilance and monitoring of worms, particularly as stocking rate of the property has increased. Generally the Sanders drench based on worm egg counts and always drench the ewes prior to lambing as this is when ewes are under the most stress. In most years the ewes only require a pre-lambing drench.

Selecting rams based on breeding values is important to the Sanders. Merino sires are chosen for Dual Purpose traits with a focus on wool quality and White Suffolk terminal sires have an emphasis on positive fat and early maturity.

Ram management is important to maximise fertility and pre mating checks are carried out

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with particular attention paid to any lumps in the testes, hoof health and conformation. Rams are vaccinated, drenched and Click™ applied to polls to prevent flystrike. All husbandry including shearing is carried out at least 8 weeks prior to joining to minimise stress and ensure good sperm production.

Joining at 1.5% rams is carried out in containment commencing 1st February for 5 weeks. Joining in confinement means rams have better access to ewes. Teasers have been used as a management tool 2 weeks prior to joining with the rams.

The Sanders have also trialled shearing 6 monthly for 6 years prior to changing their lambing time and increasing stocking rates. The increased stocking rate however meant the ewes were not achieving adequate staple length and therefore annual shearing has been reintroduced. The increase in ewes per hectare has meant an increase in wool and lambs per hectare and is therefore more profitable. The Sanders acknowledge there were significant benefits to 6 monthly shearing including reducing the need to crutch, no over length wool and improved sheep health.

The business has a strong focus on allowing the next generation to have a level of control to ensure that the business thrives and is sustainable into the future. April Sanders, at 23, has been appointed Manager Livestock Operations. In recent years the sheep enterprise has been a key profit driver in the business with reliable and stable returns compared to Lucerne seed.

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