

the yield, reducing vegetable matter and helping with lice control.

It was a subject also broached by the first guest speaker Primaries northern and central Wheatbelt wool technician Greg Tilbrook.

Mr Tilbrook spoke specifically about the changes to the Wilkinsons' flock after they shifted to two shearing events per annum, cutting on average an extra 1.5kg and 70mm length.

Deciding to shear twice a year must be undertaken after careful consideration, as Mr Tilbrook was clear to point out it wasn't for everyone.

Essentially it came down to genetics, selecting the right type of rams to breed animals with the optimum fibre density and length.

"Let me be clear, this is not for everyone," Mr Tilbrook said.

"But those farmers who are passionate about their sheep and want to get the maximum outputs can definitely make shearing twice work for them.

"The key is genetic selection, maintaining your ewes and maintaining fibre density when you are pushing those length parameters.

"Don't push the length at the expense of fibre density."

When asked about the extra expense of a second shearing, Mr Tilbrook said the Wilkinsons were able to cut out one of their crutching events and the extra income from the extra wool also contributed.

Genetics and nutrition were the solid building blocks of a productive Merino flock and then comes technology, according to Ceva Animal Health sales manager Russ Davis.

Maximising returns from using good genetics and reducing the seasonal breeding nature of sheep would benefit all producers looking to grow their bottom line without growing their numbers.

In order to do this, Ceva produces Regulin, a tiny implant for ewes to trigger their natural fertility response when it was time to join the rams.

Traditionally, WA producers join their ewes in October, November and December, but the ideal time for Merino ewes was in autumn over March, April and May.

Mr Davis said this was due to the days being the shortest and nights longest, which was when ewes produced the night-time hormone melatonin, ideal for joining.

Melatonin was the active ingredient of Regulin, and was used to trigger the ewe's natural fertility response and breeding capability.

"It's a technology that has been around for about 25 years but is only just catching on in Australia," Mr Davis said.

"We've gotten much better with genetics and nutrition, which are the building blocks for a productive flock.

"Then we can use technology to fill in the gaps

and ensure we are getting more lambs from the same amount of ewes."

He added that farmers needed to start looking at ways of closing the profit gap between sheep and cropping, making sheep more profitable to encourage those farmers with mixed operations to stick with sheep.

Speaking about performance was where DAFWA regional economist James Hagan stepped in, outlining the challenges and opportunities the sheep industry faced.

Mr Hagan said farmers that were running sheep operations at average or below-average levels needed to reassess what they did and their past performance record in order to improve.

He spoke about the numbers of sheep in the northern agricultural region, which encompassed Gingin to Kalbarri and sat at 1.4 million, and how farmers could improve their businesses.

"If you're performing on or below average, you have to start looking at why that is," Mr Hagan said.

"A lot of farmers in the area have gone to continuous cropping, but most of those left with sheep are doing an excellent job.

"If done well, there is a future for sheep and it really can have a significant impact on your bottom line.

"It all comes down to management and genetics, which a number of farmers

operating at above average rates clearly understand."

Genetics was the central point for fifth workshop speaker Andrew Thompson, a sheep research scientist at Murdoch University.

Dr Thompson helped those attending the workshop better understand Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) and how to use them in conjunction with visual appraisals of rams to make an informed selection.

He went through the meaning of each breeding value, how to determine the best reproductive traits and use selection indexes to make ram purchases ideally suited to a farmer's individual operation.

The theory was then backed up with a practical exercise, allowing farmers to use visual appraisal and ASBVs to rank some Challara rams brought in for inspection.

The second part of Dr Thompson's presentation involved outlining the benefits and drawbacks of using animals with increased genetic fat traits.

He said higher fat levels were ideal for tougher conditions such as the northern region, as the Merino ewes had better reproductive rates and their lambs were hardier.

Also attending the successful day was Midwest Mens Health advocate Glen Feeton, who showcased the services available to men in rural areas.



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