

Managing your way to better sheep profit

By **TAMARA HOOPER**

THERE will always be areas of any farming operation that cannot be measured economically, but managing your breeding program to optimise your profit is something every sheep breeder can achieve with the right information available to them.

Aiming to bring this information to fellow WA Merino stud and commercial breeders, Challara Poll Merino stud principals Peter and Emma Wilkinson again hosted their on-farm workshop and open day in Badgingarra last week.

"We really want to generate more confidence in the industry and the excellent research that is being done to help us improve our sheep genetics," Mr Wilkinson said.

"Having a balanced and sustainable system is key to your operation and to the future of the industry.

"It truly is financially lower risk and a smart choice to incorporate sheep, the risk is reduced further and your bottom line is boosted if you manage the breeding properly."

Astute Merino breeders travelled from as far as Wagin and Collie to hear the latest results from breeding trials and information presented by specialists in genetics, wool, ASBV indices and parasite control.

Guest speakers included Dr Watts, who spoke on breeding for fleece quantity and quality, Dr Thompson, who discussed the role of fat in reproduction and how to utilise ASBV, Greg Tillbrook, Primaries of WA wool representative, who relayed his knowledge of the international marketplace and wool trends, while John Karlsson shared his worm control research.

The day also involved hands-on practical interactions, with participants testing their knowledge and expanding their understanding of how to assess animals for desirable traits such as fleece length and density, and understanding how ASBV

measurements provided translated from figures on a page to actual performance.

Dr Watts said the key factors to genetic improvement revolved around four fundamental elements he had managed within the SRS Merino.

Dr Watts said genetic research into Merino sheep had shown autumn was the best time for joining in the southern hemisphere.

"Autumn joining provides the best outcomes because the rams have fully potentiated semen," he said.

"This refers to the genetic integrity and amount of sperm produced.

"More than half of the sheep in Australia are joined out-of-season, resulting in less successful lambing percentages and traits not being as successfully carried over."

Dr Watts said environmental fitness was the ability of the animal bred to cope under a wide scope of environmental conditions.

He said the concept of environmental fitness embodied the idea of natural selection and tailored breeding was able to achieve this.

He said this affected the number of lambs weaned, increasing the survival of lambs and reducing losses from conception to weaning.

Primaries wool representative Greg Tillbrook offered attendees a thorough insight into the performance of Challara's wool clip and market trends and developments in the industry.

He said India was processing more greasy wool than in the past.

"This is due to stricter environmental constraints being implemented in China in relation to effluent from wool processing plants and this is increasing costs," he said.

"It is cheaper for India to process the wool.

"China also has a chemical that can essentially reduce the micron of wool during the spinning process."

Participants were obviously



□ Lindy Grant (left), Dongara, chatted with guest speakers Greg Tillbrook, Primaries of WA wool representative and Jim Watts, SRS genetics. Ms Grant said she was new to farming and wanted to get as much information as possible, with the Challara workshop being extremely useful.

highly wool focused and interested in market trends for wool type and demand.

Mr Tillbrook said the carding indicator was at an all-time high, there was still good demand for China type, 21 micron fleece wool, prem wools were well sought after, there had been less volatility in the market and India was an emerging market for processing.

"The higher demand for the shorter type wools works in with the open tops being more conducive to the active/outdoor wear markets, with less demand for the traditional suit markets," he said.

He outlined the success Challara had had with its decision to move to a twice-a-year shearing program that had the pros outweighing the cons, although he said it was not the model for everyone.

"It has definitely been successful to date, especially with the way the shorter wools have been in demand," Mr Tillbrook said.

Dr Thompson said ASBVs are a guide to genes and are a relatively simple equation on paper that worked to provide an outcome over a longer term through management.

"They are the tools to help you implement beneficial changes to your breeding," he said.

"The statistics show that

about 30pc of breeders selling Merino rams in Australia use ASBVs, but realistically it is probably more like 10pc and an even lower percentage of people who know how to correctly utilise the information."

He said an index combined the ASBV for several traits into one value – economic gain – and was available to suit a range of different breeding objectives, offering a quick selection guide to narrow down choice.

Mr Karlsson gave a brief overview of his work into worms and the research on resistance to chemicals available for drenching.

He looked at integrated parasite management (IPM) and said the four main areas to focus on were increased host resistance, improved management, environmental management and selective use of chemicals.

"The timing of drenching is important and should really coincide with the time of greatest worm burden on pastures – autumn," Mr Karlsson said.

Mr Wilkinson said a lot of organisation had gone into realising the workshop and this was achieved with special thanks to the Moora Youth Care Group volunteers and school chaplains Wilson and Jodie Cooper, who volunteered their time to provide catering.