

RICHMOND

M E R I N O S

Flock No. 5021

WELCOME TO OUR 2024 NEWSLETTER



SHEDDING & FEEDING - WHY DON'T WE?

From the beginning we have always presented our sale rams as entirely paddock run with limited supplementary feeding. This has not always been an easy path to follow especially considering the inevitable comparisons with production fed and shedded rams that are on display at field days and sheep shows around the country. In support of this outdated practise we often hear the old chestnut "You need to give your rams the opportunity to show their maximum genetic potential". At Richmond we think it is much more genetically beneficial to give our rams the opportunity to fail. Taking this approach enables us and our clients to identify the rams with lesser genetic merit before mistakenly including them in our breeding programs.

All Richmond rams are 100% paddock run in the one mob from birth through to sale day

Below I have listed a number of reasons why we have chosen to continue the "No shedding, limited preparation" path for ram breeding.

- For accurate data collection winter & spring drop rams need to be all run in the one mob from the best through to the culls. Drafting off the top end for sale & show purposes before data collection makes it almost impossible to generate meaningful figures.
- Extremely high nutrition levels cover up constitution faults making the mob more physically even & masking bad doers
- Any form of shedding whether it be full or even part time will shield the rams from environmental influences giving an unrealistic fleece appearance especially masking colour & fleece rot.
- Many overfed rams on very high protein stud mix will be temporarily infertile with a percentage never fully recovering.
- The huge investment of time & money in feeding & shedding is for us much better spent in ways that will directly impact the genetic gain of the flock.
- Paddock run rams will have little trouble adjusting to their new homes & should be ready to join from the day they are picked up.

A QUICK WORD ON FEED EFFICIENCY

When adding up our feeding costs for our lot fed wether lambs this winter I was once again surprised at how much less grain they were consuming compared to the industry average. With the general industry consensus sitting around 3% bodyweight or roughly 1.6kg/hd/day, I found that our lambs were consuming no more than 1.2kg. I had a similar result a few years ago when we had our breeding ewes in a drought lot maintaining condition on considerably less feed than the DPI recommendations.

There has been a bit of talk in the industry in recent times regarding feed efficiency with many breeders and consultants pushing the case for amongst other things smaller adult frame size. While I am not against moderately sized adult sheep as such animals do have other advantages the reality is that unless we can accurately measure individuals feed intake in comparison to wool & meat production then we have no

real idea about their actual efficiency in converting energy consumed into profit for the breeder. I have no doubt that there are some larger in animals in every flock that are eating less than smaller individuals and some smaller and perhaps less productive sheep that are eating as much or possibly more than their larger peers. I also believe that there are similar differences in these feed conversion rates across entire flocks. There are no doubt a variety of reasons for these differences such as metabolic rates and digestive variances but I'm certain that one of the biggest factors is skin weight.

The skin is the largest organ in an animal's body and the energy needed for maintenance and cell division of heavy skins loaded with hard collagen fibrils must surely make a difference when it comes time to consume enough nutrients for sufficient energy allocation.

At Richmond we have worked hard over the years to develop a sheep with a skin that is light, supple and wrinkle free but still with enough depth and volume to maintain good commercial fleece weights. I'm sure that some time in the future we will have access to accurate ASBV's for feed efficiency/conversion and when this eventually happens it will be an absolute game changer regarding what the industry considers to be a profitable animal.



Richmond wether lambs fattening in feedlot conditions on 1.15kg/hd/day



2024 SALE CALENDAR

TUESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER SOUTH WEST SLOPES STUD MERINO FIELD DAYS (Harden showground)

Richmond will be in attendance displaying selected sires & sale rams.

TUESDAY 1 OCTOBER ON-PROPERTY RAM AUCTION

Inspections from 9am
Sale commences 1pm.
Offering 120 yearling rams fully measured, genomics tested and pedigreed with ASBV's and raw wool data available.

WEDNESDAY 2 OCTOBER PRIVATE SALES

Grade rams available by appointment from Wednesday onwards.

ITS BEEN AN UP AND DOWN YEAR FOR AGRICULTURE with climatic conditions varying greatly across the country from floods in the north to record breaking droughts in many areas of the southern states. The last 12 months have seen a tougher wool market however lamb and mutton prices have rallied as the year progressed to a point where at the time of writing sale yard prices for quality merino lambs are sitting at over 800c/kg dressed once again underlining the importance of dual purpose genetics.

At Richmond we are currently experiencing our second good season in a row after the floods of 2021/22 and despite a very cold and bleak start to the winter ample amounts of soil moisture should bode well for a good spring. This years sale will include some high end carcass genetics from both outside and home bred sires and the early indicators from our genomics tests suggest some very good all round production figures for both fibre and carcass. As usual we are more than happy to accommodate anyone looking to privately inspect the sale rams prior to Auction day. Please feel free to contact us at any time if you would like to run your eyes over the sale team.

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Lot 7 purchased by Coleburra and Benefield merino studs for \$16,000

Lot 6 purchased by Pepper Well merino stud for \$14,000

2023 SALE REPORT

After such a successful 2022 sale and with market forces conspiring against us we were genuinely expecting a quite sale in line with many of the seasons auction results. We were absolutely thrilled and surprised at the strength of the sale which propelled us into the top 10 of merino on property sale averages nationwide. It has always been a priority for us to present rams that are totally paddock raised and although we have often felt somewhat hesitant in this approach especially regarding the extreme preparation and feeding of many other sale rams I feel that we can honestly say that our clients have educated themselves to understand the importance of buying paddock run animals. The confidence that our clients now have in not only the accuracy of the figures displayed on the day but also the ability of Richmond rams to perform holding their physical condition and fleece quality is extremely satisfying.

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The sale hit 5 figures early in the catalogue when a syndicate of Gunallo and Benefield poll merino studs paid \$14,000 for lot 3, a high end carcass ram sired by Kiandra 358 with an elite quality fibre.

The sale was notable for a strong stud presence at the top end with the top price of \$16,000 for lot 7 which equaled the on farm record set in 2023 knocked down to a SA syndicate of Coleburra and Benefield poll merino studs. A beautiful loose skinned young sire with visual density and staple length combining impressive wool tests, productive ASBV's and faultless confirmation. Lot 6 was picked up by Pepper Well merino stud for \$14,000 and was a standout for balanced production across both meat and wool traits while still retaining a stud quality fleece. Both rams were sired by Benefield 200055 and both also had semen retained to use in the Richmond flock. Glenville merino stud from the Eyre peninsula also grabbed two stud quality high muscle sires for \$6,000 each while Rocky point Merinos Byawatha Vic, secured a new sire at lot 17 for \$8,000.

Volume buyers on the day were Geeron partnership, Forbes with 16 rams , MQ Hunter, Bribbaree 12 rams and Green Grove pastoral with 10 rams.

Despite the great support at the dearer end almost one third of the catalogue was knocked down for \$2,000 or less which gave more budget minded buyers a great opportunity to secure quality sires at realistic prices.

Overall we were thrilled with the support from both old and new clients and greatly appreciated the confidence displayed during less than ideal market conditions.

SCIENCE OR VISUAL?

In recent years the merino industry has increasingly become divided into two camps. One camp enthusiastically extolling the virtues of data collection and figures in the form of ASBV's with the other remaining loyal to the time honoured tradition of visual appraisal. Both groups, generally led by stud breeders are equally assured that they are on the right path to breeding better sheep but who exactly is right and where does it leave the commercial grower?

It goes without saying that science should always be respected whatever the subject is that we are dealing with. There are however some important factors that come into play when following the scientific path.

Firstly we need to understand that science is always evolving and what we understand to be right today may not necessarily be right in 5, 10 or 20 years time. This doesn't mean that we should ignore current science it simply means that we need to apply an open minded approach with the understanding that our knowledge of a particular subject may change or evolve over time. A good example of this within the merino industry was the introduction of objective measurement in the 1970's and in particular micron testing. Before 1972 it was universally accepted that "quality count" or crimp boldness was the determining factor in fibre diameter however once micron testing was introduced and this theory was debunked the industry became almost completely dependent on it as a selection tool to the point where in many flocks across the country vital processing characteristics such as softness, style, lustre and elasticity were completely disregarded. It's obvious that objective measurement is here to stay and plays an important role in the sale description of our wool but we have learnt over time and through our mistakes to treat it as just another tool in the toolbox. I see a familiar pattern emerging with the use of ASBV's if we're not careful.

Secondly if we are heading down the scientific path we need to make sure that we develop a satisfactory understanding of the science we are studying in order to gain maximum value of its use. In regards to ASBV's its important to understand the processes involved in collecting the data that gives an animal a particular ASBV figure. If for example we are



Breeding fleece quality like this is very difficult to do when using computer programs or ASBV's as your primary selection tool.

looking at YCFW (yearling clean fleece weight) the figure may only be derived from correlations to other traits without any raw data. The animal might also be missing other vital information such as ancestry pedigree and birthing status resulting in a low accuracy final figure for fleece weight that may be a poor reflection of the animals actual genetic merit. Without taking these factors into account it is pointless to simply look at a computer screen full of figures and expect to select superior animals.

Another science based selection system that has played a big role in the evolution of the Richmond flock are the principles based around skin biology and follicle growth developed by the late Dr Jim Watts. The understanding of this intriguing but often ignored science is vital to the development of superior processing fibres and also plays a role in breeding a more efficient and sustainable animal. It is important to remember that while quantitative genetics based programs such as ASBV's can

lift production it is very difficult to breed high percentages of elite fibre in your flock without visual appraisal combined with a good understanding of skin biology.

The take home message is science is great, it is the future and we should embrace it however we should also keep an open mind and understand that it is not infallible and needs to be used sensibly for maximum results. At Richmond we were early adopters of breeding values and are now combining our data collection with the use of DNA testing for parentage and genomics testing for improved data accuracy. We believe that breeding values will continue to play a significant role in the progress of our flock but first and foremost our sheep must be structurally correct with a high quality fibre growing off a soft, pliable and wrinkle free skin and it is only after this criteria is met do we begin to be influenced by the quantitative genetics based science of ASBV's.

