

Newsflash BWBL Group Profile – September 2019

Group – BWBL Willaura Coordinator – Dr Steve Cotton

- Based in Hamilton (from Cavendish, Marnoo, St Arnaud, Wando, Warracknabeal to Willaura)
- Active 7 years
- Currently 16 businesses

Enterprise mix

- Mainly mixed farming businesses of sheep and crop producers (av breeding flock of 4-5000)
- Mostly self-replacing Merinos with 3 to 4 properties running maternal composites and cattle

MLA project

- The group is currently in the third year of an MLA funded PDS project investigating the use of temporary fences to halve mob size during lambing. The results so far have demonstrated a net benefit of \$8.58/ewe or \$33.25/ha in extra lamb survival from halving twin mobs at lambing.

Group tour – New Zealand

In June 2019, Steve Cotton arranged a tour for the Willaura BWBL group to look at Merino systems in New Zealand. Thirteen producers from the group took part in the tour. About 90% of group members are Merino wool growers, with a significant area of their properties allocated to cropping. Therefore, the timing of the tour had to fit into their cropping program.

The 5-day tour started in Christchurch and finished in Queenstown. On average 4 properties were visited each day. On the first day the group visited the New Zealand Merino Company, who cover a broad base from grower suppliers to brand partners. The group heard from their research and marketing team about the operation of the business.

- New Zealand Merino Company www.nzmerino.co.nz/

In keeping with the cropping interests of the group, a visit was made to a farm with the world record barley yield for one year. Timaru growers Warren and Joy Darling have been growing barley for more than 30 years and set a world record in 2015 at their 'Poplar Grove Farm', with a yield of 13.8 t/ha from the Blackman Agriculture bred variety 776.

The group also visited 'Visulea', the property owned by Barrie and Yvonne Payne, who produced the second finest bale of wool on record. All sheep are housed indoors and kept in coats. New Zealand still holds the title of the finest wool with a 10.65 bale at 104 kg. This means the wool is finer than silk, vicuna or cashmere! The challenge for these types of businesses is to keep the tensile strength up!

A large station in the highlands was also on the itinerary. Elevation was to 3000 metres with an average rainfall of 1000 mm/year. Sheep are mustered with helicopters. This was a stark contrast to properties on the flats which had an average rainfall of 350 to 550 mm/year (which was similar to the rainfall averages of the Willaura group members).

A big 'take home message' for the group was the New Zealander's approach to feed. Through winter, different stock feeds such as rye corn, kale and swedes are grown. Two members of the group from near Lake Bolac are now intending to trial rye corn. Another aspect was how closely the New Zealander's monitor the cost of feed compared to intake. Through rotational or strip grazing they keep tabs on the costs of growing a crop or pasture and the utilisation of that feed, so they have clear figures on cents per dry matter.

All participants learned a great deal about Merino and cropping operations. One of the group members, Maddie, took excellent notes about each farm and shared an extract with us. Details recorded for the property 'Nine Mile' include land size, rainfall, soil constraints, business aims, stock numbers, enterprise structure and management approach. Her notes indicate the willingness of the property owners to share information and the high level of interest among the group members.

The social side of the tour was a great bonus. Discussions over dinner in the evening were robust and passionate, yet respectful of differing opinions. Topics ranged from the landscape to genetics, staple length, mulesing and to a comparison of blowfly size between New Zealand and Australia!

One of the big points of discussion among the group was the New Zealand approach to mulesing. It became a banned practice there in October 2018, however a lot of farmers had ceased mulesing around 10 years earlier in response to consumer attitudes. This was an eye-opener for our group and, as a direct result from the tour, three of the members who have big operations have ceased mulesing this year.

One unexpected outcome was the cohesion among the group. On return the members started a What's App group to share their farming information and views. The group is now keeping in touch between scheduled meetings more than ever before, with the next tour already being discussed. Ideas have come in for Tasmania or Western Australia.



Picture: Willaura BestWool/BestLamb Group, New Zealand June 2019



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