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COOPWORTH NATIONAL SELECTED RAM SALE

**MONDAY 24TH OCTOBER
HAMILTON SHOWGROUNDS**

**INSPECTION FROM 11.30 am
SALE 1.00 pm**

60 Rams from the top 20% of the breed in both Australia and New Zealand*, meaning they have a Coopworth Production Index of greater than 120.
(*Since 15/02/2011, the Lambplan Coopworth data set includes all the New Zealand sheep recorded in Sheep Improvement Limited's Coopworth data set.)

COMPOSITES: FACT & FICTION

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The buzz-word within the prime lamb industry is the word "COMPOSITE". This article attempts to analyse what is available to the commercial breeder, hoping to sort the wheat from the chaff. You see advertisements for "Composite" ewes similar to the following: Eighteen months old. Well-grown. Gudair vaccinated. Unmated. November shorn.

What are they? What is the breed composition? You must have some idea of the major breed components, particularly of the young rams you are intending to buy. The reasons are fairly obvious. eg. 60% Poll Dorset, 30% Coopworth and 10% other sounds reasonable, but maybe they are Lincoln x Polwarth x Ryeland? Possibly they are by some sort of Composite ram out of cull Merino ewes? It would be nice to know if they were by superior Lambplan sires.

Two generations of Lambplan selection would be even better. Perhaps they are 50% Coopworth, 25% East Friesian and 25% Texel with the parental sires all from Lambplan flocks. They probably are not. Stock agents are telling producers to get into composites. That buzz word! Unfortunately there seems to be more fiction than facts. What are they composites of? It is important! One mob of ewes described as composites turned out to be purely East Friesian x Merino ewes. Hardly composites. Purely straight crossbreds. They were a big disappointment for the purchaser.

Now to analyse what "Composite" rams are available to the commercial breeder. We are looking at maternal composites, as it seems difficult, with terminal sires, to find something better than a straight Poll Dorset. There are some very good White Suffolk rams out there. So, terminal composites are of very little importance, although one breeder, situated near Hamilton, has a good market for his sheep with a reasonable % of Southdown genetics. There is a reasonable niche market for a number of Southdown and Texel rams while the importers of Isle de France and Charollais sheep are trying hard to compete in the marketplace. Success rate ??


- A. These would probably be a comparatively set type. Probably a three-breed cross, maybe four breeds (an amalgam). The % of each component breed might vary a little each generation. This is not a problem for the buyer of these rams. They would be from a Lambplan flock, probably recorded in the Border Leicester or Coopworth data set. (Is there anything else of significance?). In the ram sale catalogue, the average of the Border Leicesters or Coopworths would be provided, so the intending buyer is able to benchmark his selections against the thousands of young rams available to industry. The ram breeder would have genetic linkage to other breeders in the data set. This is the ideal/faultless category. But, how many Composite flocks are there within this category?
- B. A three-breed cross or amalgam using Lambplan with less than 100% integrity. This usually means not advising potential clients of the average of the data set. The Coopworth and Border Leicester Percentiles are produced on the 15th of each month, so the information is readily available. The potential buyer is unable to benchmark the comparative merit of what is being offered against the industry mean. The Lambplan figures may look impressive but when you cannot compare them with what is available elsewhere, it is a "con" job. eg. The catalogue for the annual Selected Coopworth Ram Sale always has the Coopworth Percentiles available so that intending buyers can compare what is being offered compared with the (now) ten thousand other young rams (Male Progeny). In the beef industry, people selling bulls with Group Breedplan information are obliged to sign a statement ensuring the integrity of the information available. This means having the breed average at the bottom of each page, so the animals on offer can be benchmarked. Apparently this is not important with Lambplan?
- C. A three-breed cross/amalgam Lambplan recorded, but distorting the use of the breeding values and indexes so what is being offered appears to be of top value. One example quotes the average of the 2010 drop in the data set and then compares the 2011 drop with that, based purely on their pedigree information before any weaning weight figures have been taken and supplied to Lambplan. In this particular case, there is virtually no linkage to other breeders in the data set. Just a wild set of figures, not "anchored" by genetic linkage to any other ram breeder in the same data set. There are quite a number of ram breeders with their information included in the Coopworth data set, with little or no linkage (through use of a common sire, normally by AI) to other breeders. The printed publicity, in one case, showed an average for the stock on offer at Index 120 compared with the previous year's average of 115 Index in the same data set. Not comparable.
- D. Continued use of eg a Poll Dorset sire or a White Suffolk sire to create a group of sale rams that appear to be superior genetically, with this extra 10% of apparent superiority being purely heterosis (hybrid vigour) and when used on similarly bred ewes to their dams, revert back towards the mean. The ram breeder gets the benefit of the heterosis while the purchaser gets close to nothing. An example would be where the young sale ram has an index of eg 130, then, when bred to ewes of similar genetics to that of his dam, produces progeny at about index 115 to 120.
- E. Set types with no Lambplan information. Is this really a category? It has to be included as many of these animals sold each year. One ram breeder has "Composite" rams for sale that are 50% Corriedale, 25% East Friesian and 25% White Suffolk. How can you rate these rams without Lambplan? Another breeder has "Composite" rams for sale that includes Poll Dorset, Texel, White Suffolk, and East Friesian genetics. "We have a flexible breeding program that can be adjusted to suit the needs of any breeder – terminal or maternal". The genetic merit would probably be fairly flexible also.
- F. New Zealand Composite rams, imported "on four legs" or by semen and recorded on an in-house system devised by the breeder because it is "more suited to our breeding plans" than using Sheep Improvement Limited (NZ's Lambplan). This is a joke, but Australian breeders have fallen for it. You have absolutely no idea of the genetic merit of these sheep. One organisation in New Zealand

with great marketing ability and selling rams into both Victoria and Tasmania has been described as breeding “cute little sheep for running around the North Island hills” by a New Zealand breeder who bought one of their top rams and had the progeny recorded on Sheep Improvement Limited. He was able to benchmark this well marketed ram against industry sires. All a complete “con” job.

- G. No Lambplan. No set breeding plans, or plans which vary each year. Some sired by rams purchased out of some of the previous six categories above. Not necessarily following a set pathway. These are about and sell as “Composite” flock rams. That magic word. The “word” disguises any possible genetic merit or, in most case, a total lack of genetic merit.
- H. Summary: Progressive lamb breeders in the 21st century need modern genetically superior sheep that can be benchmarked against tens of thousands of others through an up-to-date system such as Lambplan. There are still odd cases in Western Victoria where the producers have confined themselves to some of the historic non-performance recorded English breeds which were developed in particular localities, keeping the particular appropriate name. They all looked the same because of the agricultural shows where the committees decreed what the sheep should look like. If yours looked different, they were hard to sell. They certainly wouldn't get a show ribbon. In most cases the fertility was and is below par. The introduction of performance recording in some of the registered Romney flocks in New Zealand has helped improve fertility as has Lambplan for the Border Leicesters in Australia.

Lambplan recorded and honestly benchmarked Composites produced by a set of sound breeding plans are good money makers for their owners and their ram clients. These are the sheep that can be honestly compared (production-wise) with “straight” Border Leicesters or “straight” Coopworths via Lambplan. That is how it should be! If they really are superior, the commercial ram buyers can purchase them with confidence. Sadly, breeders of Composite flock rams falling neatly into Category A (above) are in the minority. The majority have flaws in their systems to varying degrees resulting in doubtful genetic merit. New Zealand bred Coopworth sires, Cairnlea 742 and Cairnlea 279, being used by Australian breeders are genetically superior to any Composite sire in the Coopworth data set. There are a few Poll Dorset and White Suffolks ahead of them, but they are there courtesy of about 10% heterosis (or more). The sons of these terminal sires which have good Lambplan data of their own soon fizzle out when they are mated to ewes with similar genetics to their mothers and their progeny revert back towards the mean in genetic value. In other words, the heterosis they benefited from soon declines, and sharply.

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TRENDS IN MARKING RATES IN AUSTRALIAN SHEEP FLOCKS

By Tim Leeming

The table clearly demonstrates the lack of progress the sheep industry has made as a whole for the past 2 decades. The majority of Australia's sheep flock is based on Merino genetics but as it shows all sheep systems have plenty of room to improve .

Merino Select like Lambplan is a great way for the Australian sheep industry to improve in the above area. Genetics plays a big role as we all know in developing and improving the traits of our sheep. This hopefully in turn improves our bottom line via the provision of a desirable product that consumers want and appreciate.

Enterprise sector	Average marking rate (1990-1999)	Average marking rate (2000-2009)
Prime lamb specialists	84	85
Sheep specialists	73	71
Mixed sheep enterprises	75	74
Sheep Industry Total	77	77

Table Supplied by MLA

Genetics are important but **management** of our sheep flocks should be given a big priority. Programs such as **Lifetime Ewe** run through **RIST (Hamilton)** are showing what can be done to improve the management of our sheep flocks and perhaps also pointing out the untapped potential the sheep industry has ,especially in achieving reproduction targets.

Very usable feed budgeting along with vital condition scoring skills are honed via a small dynamic ,on farm learning environment.

The two year by six session program highlights the importance of weaning lambs and the impacts of nutrition on the reproductive cycle. The now Australia wide program which has involved hundreds of sheep producers has proved to increase weaning percentages for participating flocks. Another key learning outcome is improving lamb survival which is a proactive industry priority that should be given full attention by all sheep producers.

Those of us that have used tools such as LambPlan and have strived to improve our bottom line in the lamb industry via genetic improvement , still have massive gains to be had from simply improving our own flock management.

Those readers interested in Lifetime Ewe Management can contact RIST on ph 55730943