Supporting shifts to non-mulesed systems: Annual Summary

AgPro Management
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We all know that mulesing is becoming socially unacceptable, and worms are increasingly resistant to current drenches. Many producers who have stopped mulesing have been successful, but it is fair to say that many have also failed to sustain the change because the management issues were too difficult. The approach to shifting to non-mulesed systems is a complex one, involving genetic selection, worm, dag and fly control, husbandry timing and sheep management. The approach and suitability also varies based on environment- there is no 'one size fits all'. Among producers, therefore, we can find a mix of success stories and horror stories. Part of the problem was that there were no support networks to help the transition.

In response, AgPro Management has begun a project to help producers assess non-mules systems, how to transition, and support this shift if they chose to. The MLA-funded project involves groups of producers (or grower groups) across the medium and high rainfall zones of W.A., aiming to demonstrate how non-mulesed systems works, and equipping them with tools and skills so they can gain confidence in the changes in practice and management before they try it themselves. The project is not to force change, but rather to demonstrate what the system looks like, and enable producers to learn and decide for themselves. The non-mules project began in autumn 2020, and will continue for another three years- you are welcome to join, either trialling or as an observer.

Over the next 3 years, producers will trial one non-mules mob, comparing it to a mulesed mob. These sites will be used to show involved producers and the wider industry the impact of shifting to non-mulesed enterprises on not just management and practices, but also measurable production. Each site will measure weaner weight and survival, wool value, animal price, and husbandry costs to determine financial impact compared to traditional management, while also capturing qualitative data to analyse the social impact and changes required to management.

Results from the project so far show that the non-mulesed mobs were on average 0.78kg heavier than the mulesed at weaning time. This ranged from no difference to a 4kg advantage, while one non-mulesed mob was 4kg lighter than the mulesed mob. The average weaning weights for each mob ranged from 23.9kg to 36kg, and unfortunately birth type was not taken into account, with many producers not having EID. This would have had a large impact, with properties showing that a mulesing twins averages 15kg and singles 19kg, which would influence weaning weight significantly. Producers have reported similar or lower marking to weaning mortality in the non-mulese mob compared to the mulesed, however we do not have a strong enough data.

Flystrike rates are measured at an average of 3.4% across Australia, however producers involved in this project reported an average of 0.93%. This could indicate that we are missing many cases, have good control, or are simply bad at record keeping! So far, flystrike

occurrence within both the mulesed and unmulesed mobs is low, averaging 0.35%. Producers point out that key times of challenge are yet to occur, wool is short, and there has been little opportunity for dags to develop.

Part of the project involves a cost-benefit analysis, however wool cut and prices are missing as many producers are yet to shear. So far, there has been no noticeable differences in fleece weight. Anecdotally, the main difference in costs and benefits so far is the cheaper price of the non-mules procedure, and having one less labour unit on the marking cradle. Most producers have not differed husbandry for their non-mules mob compared to the mulesed, and if they have it has been focused on chemical use at marking or weaning. Three producers of did have to do an extra crutch or bunghole to get through to late summer shearing. Differential management may become more common as the season progresses and new challenges arise, and more animals are sold which will give us a better indication of how sale price is impacted.

Overall in this project, we have found that the qualitative data has been more valuable than the measurable data! Much of this has come from involved producers who have shifted to a non-mules system in the past. Below is the key messages from these producers:

- Don't bother to make the transition unless you have the right genetics.
- Dag management is key-through every tool you have at your disposal. It's all about working your way towards a clean flock.
- Dag score cull ewe hoggets at 12 months. Culling starts with the 5's- its up to you and the flock numbers you aim for to decide how hard to go.
- Others cull the first 10-20% that develop dags before the others.
- Worm management important to reduce dags- but make sure not leading to drench resistance issues.

Producers who have made the change or trialed in 2020, also noted the following:

- WA sheep have been bred towards non-mulese options for a while: Existing fly pressure has already driven a lot of genetics towards a non-mulesed option, partly due to body strike vulnerability. So there is only so far we can go with some genetic traits. However, it has also been recorded that WA uses ASBV's for all non-mules traits at a higher rate than other states, including WEC, wrinkle, and dags.
- Main roadblocks to transition aren't fly related, its selling culls and the fear of discounts or a reduced market, concerns about shearers and crutchers.
- Definition of non-mulesed when it comes to tailing: there can be no scarring other than where the tail has been cut- ie. no scarring either side of the tail