

SEPTEMBER 2015 CLIENT STORY

Phil & Jan Rees, Vasey



VASEY sheep producers Phil and Jan Rees are typical of woolgrowers who have had to change their enterprise from Merinos to crossbreds to survive. The Rees family has had a long history of growing wool in the area north of Hamilton, in Victoria's south-west, but have decided to focus more on a maternal composite and terminal-based flock. This year was the first in several decades that Merino rams have not been used. Phil's parents John and Marie Rees ran a predominantly self-replacing Merino flock, retaining any classed out Merino ewes to breed first cross prime lamb mothers for sale or their own use. Phil and Jan farm over about 850 hectares (2100 acres), include

their home property Erindale and part of his parent's farm Gatum, bought as part of a succession plan. Average rainfall is around 600mm. Before the Rees' stepped into crossbreds they were shearing about 4000 Merino wethers and ewes. The Rees' stopped running wethers five years ago. Phil said poor fine wool prices over several years, the need to service debt and raise three children, plus a "really bad" wool sale last year, fuelled the decision to re-think the sheep mix.

"That sale was the straw that broke the camel's back – we've been at it for 20-odd years. How long do you stay in an industry when you are not getting paid for it?" The wool market would have to lift at least 800-900 cents a kilograms for him to join a Merino ram again, he said. "It is pretty disheartening. We sold wool back in June and the market reports were saying it was going gangbusters – the oddment side of it is, but the fleece is still pretty ordinary," he said. "I'm afraid wool just wasn't going to cut it for us."

In the past any Merino ewes classed out of the commercial flock went under Border Leicester rams to breed a first cross ewe, with the wether portion sold as prime lambs. "We were originally using Border Leicesters to do that and had no dramas selling the ewes, but I was having trouble with the wether lamb side of the operation. We were virtually giving them away or you had to carry them nearly 10 months before you would get paid any dividend for them."

So at the suggestion of Chrome principal Matt Tonissen, the Rees' tried some Coopworth rams five years ago. "We have been able to turn the Coopworth wether lambs off quicker than the Border Leicesters – they seem to get more finish on them. So from then I just tipped all the Border Leicesters out and just went Coopworth over the Merinos to get our first cross ewe," Phil said.

"This last year we've joined the balance of the Merinos back to a maternal composite." He predominately used Matt and Tanya Tonissen's Chromedale rams. Phil said the plan was to get a quicker growing lamb from the Coopworth and maternal composite rams. "The proof will be in the pudding this year, because we are only 12 months in and this is our first drop from the maternal composite rams. I was wondering which way to go and had a mate who made the transition a good five years ago, who said if he had his time again he would have gone straight to maternal composites."

Phil has also been joining his Coopworth-Merino ewes to terminal rams – the Tonissen's Icon Poll Dorsets and a few White Suffolks to produce prime lambs. "The plan is to go to a self-replacing maternal composite flock and any ewes that don't cut the mustard will go to a terminal sire."

Phil has been able to turn his July-August drop Coopworth cross wether lambs off over-the-hook at supermarket carcass weights of 22-23kg within seven months. "We've still had to shear them, but whereas we have had to carry the (BL-Merino) first cross wether lambs through to May the following year, we can get the Coopworth cross lambs off in February.

We've been averaging over our \$100 for them, with as many as possible sold over the hooks on a supermarket grid."

Phil has done a Lifetime Ewe Management course and having the tighter lambings will mean more attention will be given to managing ewes according to scanning and condition score. In recent years he has

weaned lambs prior to sale and they have managed to continue to gain weight on his best pasture, while the ewes got an earlier break from the lambs.

Phil said the new flock makeup with it two earlier lambings, instead of three and better lamb prices with fewer Merinos was less stressful. "It has taken the pressure off, it's incredible. "We would still be lambing now, we would be just starting with Merinos, but all our lambing is done and I'm looking at the first cross ewes now and thinking we should start weaning some of those lambs," he said. "Whereas before, we would be racing around with lambing ewes."

Phil said he was selecting his maternal and composite rams on physical criteria, but also with estimated breeding values for early lamb growth, muscle and genetic fat. "The big driver is the lambing percentage and I'm hoping to get that to around 140-150 per cent so we are running fewer ewes and turning off more lambs per hectare. "At the end of the day it is the amount and weight of lambs that leave the property on the back of a B-double that we are getting paid for," he said. "If we can do that by running 2500-3000 ewes and turn off 4500-5000 lambs it is going to make my life a whole lot easier," he said. "I'll be able to go away on a holiday and enjoy the family a bit more and pay a bit of debt – and that's what it is all about.

"You've only got to stick between 20-50 cents a kilogram on per lambs and it is worth a lot of money to you," Phil said. "Whereas the wool job, it is too bloody volatile.

"Like a bloke said to me: Passion and insanity are very closely related in the wool industry."

Phil said it was unfortunate that we live in an air-conditioned world and people don't need to buy wool anymore, but the world needs protein.

"It's a fantastic fibre. The only thing wrong with wool is you can't eat it."