

Buying replacement ewes

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The availability, selection, purchase price and transport cost of replacement ewes can vary widely between different areas and with prevailing seasonal conditions.

Values will vary with presentation, assessed quality and age. Asking prices are usually at a premium for maiden ewes and from then on decline to prevailing mutton prices for ewes 6 or 7 years old.

Five main types of replacement ewes are frequently found:

1. Second choice of classed maiden ewes.
2. Classed maiden ewes.
3. Adult breeding ewes.
4. Sound caste-for-age ewes.
5. Aged ewes.

Before replacements are purchased examine the expected:

- wool returns
- lambing performance
- death rates
- cost to purchase and transport to home property.

You can expect a substantial variation between flocks due to both environmental and genetic effects.

It is helpful to have some local knowledge or prior experience to ensure satisfactory results from the ewes you are buying.

Wool Cut per head

The normal pattern is for wool production to reach a maximum at 2 or 3 years of age and then decline. The decline is slow up to 5 or 6 years, and then becomes more rapid.

Wool prices

Two-tooth wool attracts a higher price as it tends to be finer and of better quality than wool from older ewes.

Wool quality is relatively stable up to 4 or 5 years of age. After this age the wool quality declines, causing a decline in wool value.

Lambing performance

Lambing performance takes longer to reach its peak. The decline is not very marked in ewes up to 7 or 8 years old, except where environmental effects, such as grazing oestrogenic clovers, have intervened to give lower performance.

Twinning rates increase from the younger to older age groups. The growth rate of twins is slower than that of singles.

Lambs from weaner or maiden ewes usually have lower growth rates than those from ewes in their prime on second and third lambings.

Ewe liveweight will influence joining performance, subsequent lamb drop and spread of lambing.

Ewe liveweight and condition need to be considered when purchasing replacements, particularly if joining is to commence shortly.

Maiden ewes should average more than 40 kg and mature ewes more than 45 kg at joining.

In times of nutritional stress, the death rate in older ewes and their lambs can be higher than in younger ewes.

Death rates

In adult ewes up to 6 years old, normal death rates are about 4 per cent per year and go up to about 8 per cent in 9-year-old ewes. Death rates in weaner ewes are usually 1 to 2 per cent higher than in the main age groups.

Ewe values

The prevailing conditions on your property may mean that ewes have to be retained to an older age, or that your potential stocking rates cannot be fully exploited. A cash flow assessment of available ewe purchase options can help clarify what particular action you should take.

General body and teeth condition will govern just how long ewes can be usefully retained in a flock, and their ultimate sale value.

Aged ewes with 'sound mouths' can be relied on for a further one or two breeding seasons. Ewes with 'broken mouths' should be consigned to slaughter.

Further considerations

When you are buying ewes from distant locations you should consider the local conditions and disease aspects.

Be particularly aware of:

- The ovine Johne's disease (OJD) situation in the flock and whether they have been OJD vaccinated.
- Other diseases such as foot rot and Lice infestation.
- The increasing incidence of drench resistant worms.
- Clostridial disease and vaccination history.

To protect your trading rights and your business, insist on an Animal Health Statement and a National Vendor Declaration on all mob purchases.

Information on previous grazing history (especially exposure to heliotrope, Paterson's curse or other alkaloid-containing plants, or exposure to oestrogenic clovers) may help to avoid problems or disappointment with the survival and performance of your ewes when they are brought to the home property.

Ewes that have been correctly mulesed can save expenditure on supervision and management.

It is worthwhile inspecting the udders of at least a sample of the mob on offer. This will reveal if lamb rearing is likely to be adversely affected by a high percentage of damaged udders. Such damage can be caused by:

- teats being cut at shearing
- mastitis
- overlarge and blocked teats.

For updates go to

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/factsheets

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