

## Producer Testimonial – Neil Hamilton

Neil Hamilton started his livestock enterprise many years ago with just 50 Merino ewes and has never looked back.

Farming on the 1100 hectare property, 'Cloverdale' at Ouyen in the Victorian Mallee, Neil and family are one of the few in the area that have livestock as a main enterprise in conjunction with cropping, rather than total cropping.

"Livestock and especially sheep have been very good and made us a lot of money for a long time, so when on a good thing, stick to it," Neil said when explaining why.

Regular followers of the Ouyen sheep and lamb market, where Neil also works for agents, Landmark as a yardman, would be well aware of the regular sale topping lambs produced on 'Cloverdale'.

In their sheep enterprise, Neil and family run 550 SAMM/Merino cross ewes which they buy in, looking to purchase 100 to 150 ewes per year. They mate these to Poll Dorset rams to produce heavy export weight prime lambs.

"Prime lambs are our main product, with wool as a secondary product. Therefore we want a lamb factory as good as we can get and these ewes are outstanding. By using this cross we sacrifice one kilogram of wool, but because of their far superior milking and mothering ability and carcass attributes, they produce a much better overall outcome than straight Merino or Corriedale ewes that we have used in the past," Neil said.

At 'Cloverdale' there are two mating times. The mature ewes are mated in early November for an April/May lambing, with young bought-in ewes mated from the end of January, with lambing consistently averaging over 120%. The maidens have also achieved lambing percentages from 100 to 120% in recent years.

Neil is adamant that the prime lambs he produces must be well muscled. When Texels emerged on the Australian sheep scene he used them because of their muscling reputation and especially their hindquarter conformation.

"However we found their growth rates were behind Poll Dorsets, a breed that has improved out of sight in the last decade in particular," Neil said.

"They have excellent growth rates, muscling and hindquarter conformation and because of their frame size they produce lambs that continue to keep growing through to big heavyweights, our target market. Also their wedge shaped bodies and open faces make them very easy care. I can't remember the last time I had to pull a lamb at birth.

"With quality genetics that have these attributes you can always find a home for lambs, whether that is in a market for finished lambs, or to a feedlotter when times are poor. They are worth good money all the time," Neil said.

“We buy our rams from the Glen Devon stud in South Australia. The Hart family produce the type of rams we are after and put up a hundred for sale each year that are like peas in a pod. That consistency ensures we can produce a consistent quality lamb product that attracts buyer attention,” he added.

Neil believes in conservative stocking rates as this allows him to finish lambs consistently despite the variance of climate in this area.

“Every year is different in the Mallee. You need to be selling lambs when they are ready, not when you need money. You need to be able to read the season and the markets the best you can and try to get your management and marketing decisions right,” he said.

The pastures are primarily lucerne based. This is sown under a barley cover crop and Neil gets up to 10 years from a stand. A quarter of the property is under lucerne at any one time.

Neil targets the heavy export weights, selling 40 to 80 at a time, mostly weighing in excess of 30kg carcass weight. He said the genetics he is using allow him to target that market efficiently and effectively but realises it is not for everyone.

Neil Hamilton is also a man who loves a challenge. He has been heavily immersed in the local Mallee Prime Lamb Group, running many lamb trials and has soaked up the information available.

“I always challenge myself to produce the best product I can, whether that is lambs or crops. Without accepting a challenge you’re not going to push yourself to get a better result. Also to be successful you’ve got to be prepared to spend a quid to make a quid,” he said.

“Too many want to buy \$10 ewes and \$100 rams and expect to produce good lambs. A superior \$1000 ram soon pays for itself.”

Accepting these challenges has driven Neil to achieve regular sale topping results at Ouyen or at Bendigo if that market is more appropriate. He was the first producer to top \$200/head at Ouyen and recently received \$206/head at Bendigo for the first of the late 2013 drop lambs taken through to these heavy weights. The balance were sold at Ouyen over the next few weeks and before the new season suckers came in to the market in numbers, and received over \$180 or better for the whole drop.

With a conservative stocking rate, it also opens up the possibility of opportunistic store lamb purchases. If the season permits and the lambs are available, he buys up to 200 lambs per year, providing they have a quality genetic background. He said you need to identify stock that will do well and his agent position is an advantage in achieving this.

Besides a concern for where future ‘lamb factory’ ewes are going to come from, his dilemma is the thousands of stubbles that are wasted.

“There is a huge potential income option being bypassed by total croppers every year. If you put something into sheep you get rewarded three times over. With excellent stock transport now available they could easily utilise these wasted stubbles and the returns could easily offset their fertiliser and chemical costs at the least,” Neil said.

“I like a feed and I also like to feed my livestock well. Good feed allows the full expression of their genetic potential. It costs the same to feed poor ewes as good ones, so choose good ones. They are the ‘factory’ for a successful prime lamb enterprise,” he said.

“Also, it is important to keep learning. You are never too old to learn something new that can improve your overall results,” Neil concluded.



*Ouyen prime lamb producer Neil Hamilton is pictured in front of mostly July drop Poll Dorset sired heavyweight lambs. The first draft of these recently made \$206/head at Bendigo and these will be marketed at Ouyen over the next few weeks before the influx of new season suckers in August.*



*These SAMM/Merino cross ewes are the ‘lamb factory’ foundation for Neil Hamilton’s successful prime lamb enterprise. Their Poll Dorset sired lambs were dropped in April with over 120% marked.*



*A barley crop sown as a cover crop for a new lucerne stand that will be grazed for eight to ten years before again being cropped with wheat. Lucerne is the backbone in Cloverdale's grazing pastures to finish top heavy export weight lambs.*