

## Derrynock Poll Dorset's & Maternals

### *Stronger lambs/born easier!*

Management and nutrition of the ewe will always have the greatest influence over lamb survival. However, there are huge benefits to be gained from having stronger lambs at birth, with a greater cold tolerance, and plenty of quality milk available.

A focus on moderate birth weight with an average or shorter gestation length, and increased milk production, has helped to decrease ewe assist rate at birth, improve lambing ease and lift lamb survival in commercial ewes at Derrynock to above 90%. This is well above the industry average of around 70%, and has huge economic implications. We are very excited about the results, in particular when incorporating selection pressure on the gestation length as part of our overall lamb survival strategy. With scanning rates reaching 200% in our commercial flock of approx 1200 Maternal ewes in recent years, it was time to increase our focus on lamb survival.

We are finding our best results are coming from ewes having 4.5 -5.5 kg lambs at birth. This has meant we can utilise rams with higher birth weights (0.4 to 0.5) for mature ewes, and subsequent growth rates, that also have shorter gestation length ASBV's (approx -1.0). Lambs that are born earlier are not necessarily lighter, but are born with a lot more ease. They generally appear wetter at birth, and the ewes appear to lamb quickly and with vastly fewer presentation issues. The actual gestation length of the ewes recorded over the past 8-10 years has varied from 140 days to 153 days. We would say that approximately 90% of lambing problems occur in those ewes lambing after 150 days, with a higher incidence of presentation issues, big lambs, dry or yellow coloured, or stressed lambs at birth. As a result of selection, we have moved our average gestation length from 148.5 days back to 147 days in Poll Dorset ewes, and 146 days in our maternal composites over the past 3 years. Emphasis on good smooth shoulder and neck placement is also important.

As a direct result of the information gathered from Gestation length (gl) progeny testing in our commercial and stud flocks, we have seen a reduction in our birth assist rate to **less than 1%** in mature ewes. This has resulted in a lamb survival rate of 92% at birth, over all birth type categories. The flock pregnancy scanned at 180% average over all year drops.

We are hopeful that conducting economically relevant sire progeny tests, utilising our commercial ewe flock that we will continue to improve the profitability of our commercial clients, with continued focus on Eating Quality with particular emphasis on Marbling, feed conversion, lamb survival and early maturity. We will have some of the highest ranked Poll Dorset & Maternal rams for marbling available for sale in 2021, with their progeny being utilized in progeny testing that will evaluate lambs at different ages/weights being fed on a range of different rations.

With an emphasis on Eating Quality, Maturity and disease resistance in both our Maternal and Terminal flocks we believe that Derrynock can provide a rare opportunity for producers to make quick improvements in traits like lamb survival and marbling, with selection pressure provided on both sides of the Genetic equation.