

Spring Dohne Dual-purpose performers



■ Wayne Hawkins, Circle H Farms, Frances, SA, runs about 5500 Dohne and Dohne-White Suffolk ewes, and says they produce great lambs.

Stick to good-doing Dohnes

At a glance

- ◆ Wayne and Sally Hawkins
- ◆ Circle H Farms, Frances, SA
- ◆ Running 5000 Dohne ewes and 600 Dohne-White Suffolk ewes
- ◆ JBS Great Southern Lamb Producer of the Year earlier this year



By LOUISE PREECE

WHEN Wayne and Sally Hawkins realised their Merino sheep were not performing, they knew something had to change.

"They would cut wool, but they weren't breeding the way we wanted them to," Mr Hawkins said, who runs Circle H Farms, Frances, South Australia.

His business also incorporates cropping, and Mr Hawkins was keen to see improved weight gain in the lambs.

"I love growing canola, and I love putting urea on and seeing it go berserk," he said. "I wanted to see that same reaction in the sheep, but the Merino lambs just weren't doing that."

It was the mid-1990s and the couple's pursuit to find a sheep that would produce more lambs led them straight to Dohnes.

The dual-purpose breed appeared to tick all the boxes for the Hawkins.

At the time, agribusiness consultant Ken Solly was taking a group of people on a MacKillop Farm Management tour to check out a handful of Dohne operations in Western Australia. The Hawkins decided to go along.

"I loved the Dohnes; they really had some 'go,'" he said.

"Our goal was to produce more numbers and meat. The Dohnes' lambing percentages were about 15-20 per cent better than Merinos, so that was a step in the right direction."

The Hawkins were more than impressed, and returned to SA with some Dohne embryos.

"Not long after that, a lot of the WA breeders were hit by the drought and needed to cut back on their numbers," he said.

"So we purchased some of their sheep."

For the Hawkins, the transition from Merinos to Dohnes was well on the way.

However, it wasn't just their Merino flock's failure to produce enough lambs that cemented their decision to change directions.

The wool market just wasn't viable, and putting a larger emphasis

on meat seemed to make sense.

"We made a decision to feed rather than cloth people," he said.

"People don't wear wool anymore, and clothes won't keep you alive."

Today, the Hawkins run 5000 Dohne ewes and 600 White Suffolk-Dohne ewes.

The Hawkins recently gave up leased country in Victoria, which has led to them scaling back their sheep flock.

I want them to grow like mushrooms; put on as much weight as possible, and get out of there.

— WAYNE HAWKINS,
Frances, SA

prime lamb production.

"After harvesting the lucerne, the circles are watered up and the ewes are put on the circles ready to start lambing on April 15," he said.

"We leave the lambs on the circles to fatten up. And we also fatten lambs on the spring pastures and when the feed dries off, they go onto legume stubbles and, if necessary, they finish off in the feedlot."

After three months all the lambs are weaned and by the end of August they begin to get weighed.

"The lambs that were born from April 15 will be weighed in two weeks' time," Mr Hawkins said.

"About 50-60pc of those will be ready to be sold, and will hopefully weigh a minimum of 48 kilograms."

Mr Hawkins said he liked to see the weight gain.

"I want them to grow like mushrooms; put on as much weight as possible, and get out of there," he said.

The balance of the April-drops will continue to be grazed, and will be checked one month later for further assessment.

Some of the lambs are also born from June 1 onwards and are put onto dryland paddocks.

A large portion of their lambs are sold to JBS. The processor's weight grid gives an 18-30kg carcass weight range, but aiming at a target of 22-24kg, based on a 44-46pc dressing percentage, means most

lambs hit that grid.

Mr Hawkins said the weight and condition score of lambs must be spot on, or they don't go.

This attention to detail might explain their JBS the couple being awarded the JBS Great Southern Lamb Producer of the Year award earlier this year – based on a 96.5pc compliance rate to grid specifications.

The couple were thrilled to win. Despite scaling back their sheep operation, the aim is to continue to focus on the lamb industry in some form.

"If I had my time again, I would still do the same thing, because Dohnes provide both meat and wool," he said.

Although the wool market has been unpredictable for a long time, Mr Hawkins said it still offered another income stream for the business.

"I've always said that if you going to have sheep, you might as well shear them," he said.

"The people who have gone completely over to Dorpers don't have that option."

On the other hand, Mr Hawkins described the lamb industry as extremely healthy.

"Everyone's got good vibes about the lamb industry," he said.

"There's good demand, and Meat & Livestock Australia are doing a great job with their marketing."



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