Sheep Handling Efficiency

Cutting out the hard work

By ANDREW NORRIS

IMPROVED efficiency in the sheep industry is an area that's fast gaining ground, as labour shortages across many rural regions make it harder to do tasks the old way.

Jobs such as drafting of sheep can take many hours when done manually, with tag reading and penning being slow.

However, New Zealand livestock equipment manufacturer Technipharm has been marketing an efficient alternative – including at Australian field days – for sheep handling.

The product is the Supadraft 3000, an automatic sheep drafter which can, if needed, draft sheep up to 20 different ways.

He said as long as the forcing pen was full and sheep were flowing into the race they would keep flowing through the drafter.

Good yard design concepts, such as bugle-shaped or curved races, were essential to get the most benefit from an autodrafter, he said.

"An autodrafter will not compensate for poor yard design," he said.

It would, however, act as quickly as the animal could move, ensuring quick drafting with good sheep flow.

The main traits most operators drafted on were weight, pregnancy status or micron.

If radio frequency identification (RFID) was not used in the flock, it was limited to just drafting on weight, but with RFID most monitors could handle as many as eight different drafting directions.

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>
> – Technipharm chief executive officer Harmen Heesen

The design is from New Zealand Ruddweigh, which Technipharm gained control of through aquisition and mergers beginning about 30 years ago.

"All the designs we've owned for 30 years," said Technipharm chief executive officer Harmen Heesen, Rotorua, NZ.

Technipharm owns the designs for the handling equipment, while the weighing side of the business remained in Australia and is these days owned by Gallagher, he said.

"A lot of our business these days is fairly direct, we've got a fairly extensive website," Mr Heesen said.

The beauty of the Supadraft 3000 was it reduced the reliance on having people to get the job done.

"The whole idea is to let the animal do its own thing in its own time and own comfort without force," he said.

"Through design you can get animals to do things without any shouting or beating."

"However, 90 per cent of the drafting is production drafting and uses three ways," he said.

Mr Heesen said when compared to manual drafting the Supadraft 3000 was four to five times as fast with half the cost, due to less labour required.

And because a person didn't need to stand at the drafting gate, it increased the throughput rate of sheep.

"The more you remove the people from the operation, the better it works," he said.

The drafter was built from aluminium and composite materials designed to reduce its weight, but to maintain a strong structure.

Self lubricating moving parts meant it operated freely with minimal noise and these could be easily replaced in the field.

"But you're talking 10 years of use before parts such as bushes need replacing," Mr Heesen said.

A quick job at Cressy

WEIGHING and drafting lambs at Rob Tole's farm in Tasmania has been made easy with the purchase of an autodrafter.

He said he would run about 30,000 sheep and lambs through it a year, with no lamb leaving the farm without being weighed first.

Mr Tole runs the 545-hectare "Greenvale" at Cressy, Tasmania, and trades in lambs, which are run alongside his cropping operation.

He said the weighing of lambs had previously been a two-man job and was slow, however, with the three-way auto-drafter it took a fraction of the time.

"One man can comfortably weigh 400 lambs and hour on his own," said Mr Tole (pictured).

This was a massive increase on the previous 250 lambs an hour before the drafter was introduced.

When using the old system, the sheep always had to run towards the front operator, so of course they baulked.

However, with an autodrafter, the operator worked from behind, pushing the sheep up, and could even be penning up while the sheep moved themselves through, he said.

"So now there's less stress on both the operator and the sheep, plus its a lot quieter," Mr Tole said.

While Mr Tole hasn't fitted his drafter with a tag scanner, he said it also had that capability.

"With the number of lambs put through and the savings it has brought it's a no brainer - it has more than paid for itself," he said.