



Prime lamb switch pays at Binalong

By HOLLY McALISTER

WHEN wool production was becoming a less profitable venture, grazier Jim McDonald decided to switch his sheep operation to focus more on prime lamb production using Border Leicester rams.

Mr McDonald, with wife Ann and son Angus, run 1200 breeding ewes on the 400-hectare property "Eubindal" at Binalong in the State's south.

They also run steers – selling these to the feedlot, abattoir or through the Wagga Wagga saleyards – and grow about 40 to 50ha of fodder cereal crops a season.

The breeding ewes are a mix of locally-bred Bogo-blood Merino ewes, joined to Border Leicester rams, with the resulting offspring joined to Poll Dorset rams as a terminal sire.

"I was running a flock of Merino wethers but when wool started becoming less profitable I decided to start crossbreeding about eight years ago," Mr McDonald said.

"Border Leicester rams were always my first choice as a sire of the first-cross lambs, and then Poll Dorsets for the Border Leicester/Merino ewes."

One of the main traits Mr McDonald selects Border Leicester rams for was fertility and as such only uses twin rams in his production.

"I also look at rams with reasonable growth, average or below average figures for birthweight and average fat coverage."

When he was running wethers strictly for wool production, Mr McDonald said he had bought in sheep from wherever he could get them, with no focus on any particular bloodlines.

When it comes to the Merino breeders, however, he said the Bogo-blood Merinos had performed extremely well in wether trials held in the region, and so produced a good quality wool as well as being fertile breeders.

The Merino ewes are bought as 1.5-year-old dry ewes and are run at "Eubindal" until they're about five or six years old.

Ewes are joined from the beginning of February at a rate of two per cent, to have lambs on the ground in time for the good feed the region gets from mid-winter onwards, Mr McDonald said.

The Merino ewes realise lambing percentages of between 105 per cent and 110pc on average, he said, while the Border Leicester/Merino ewes range between a lambing percentage of 130pc to 140pc.

"The lambs are weaned when they reach about three or four months old – they get a bit of lucerne for about a month before I start running them on mixed pastures," Mr McDonald said.

"They might also get a bit of grain, depending on how the season is going."

All the crossbred ewe lambs are joined to Poll Dorset rams when they are eight months old and those that are scanned a couple of months after joining and are well in lamb are kept as

replacements, with the surplus ewe lambs being sold at the annual Goulburn first-cross ewe sale held in January, or through AuctionsPlus.

"I've been using AuctionsPlus for about four years to sell the surplus first-cross ewe lambs," Mr McDonald said.

"They usually sell to buyers from around NSW but some have gone into Victoria as well.

"The replacement first-cross breeders are basically selected with fertility being the main focus – anything that's in lamb early in the joining is kept on, season allowing."

The wether portion of the first-cross lambs are fattened on pastures – with or without a grain supplement – and sold when they're about nine or 10 months old.

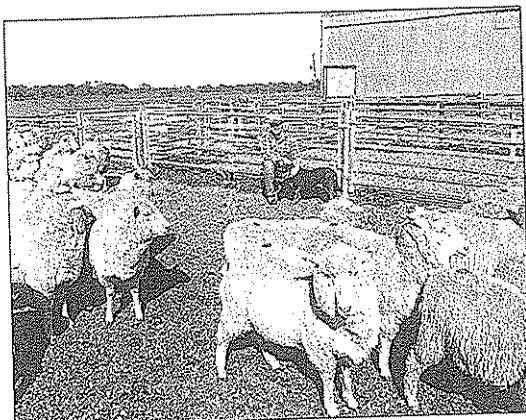
"The wether lambs will either go through the Wagga Wagga saleyards or straight over the hooks," Mr McDonald said.

"I like the Border Leicester/Merino wethers to be about 24 or 25 kilograms when they're turned off but the second-cross wether lambs that go to the same markets will turn off at 25kg-plus."

Mr McDonald said the Border Leicester rams were performing very well.

"The rams are producing exactly what I'm after," he said.

"We're getting fertile females that have an easy lambing, as well as putting up a reasonable carcass in the wether portion of the first-cross lambs."



Angus McDonald and Kelpie Bo with Border Leicester/Merino ewes at "Eubindal", Binalong.

