MERINO LIFETIME PRODUCTIVITY
PROJECT UPDATE

FAST FACTS

- The AWI-funded Merino Lifetime Productivity (MLP) project is an $11 million (including $4 million of support from project partners),10-year partnership between AWI, the Australian Merino Sire Evaluation Association (AMSEA), nominating stud Merino breeders and site hosts.

- The project aims to increase the understanding of the genetics, and economic interactions, of a diverse range of Merino types delivering high quality wool, lambs and meat through life.

- The MLP project runs at five sites where sire evaluation trials operate for the first two years and then continue tracking performance of ewe progeny as they proceed through four to five joinings and annual shearings.

- A full suite of independent visual classing and productivity traits will be assessed.

Described as one of the largest and longest Merino projects in the country, the Merino Lifetime Productivity (MLP) project recently opened its doors to industry at three of its five sites.

The MerinoLink (Temora, NSW), Elders Balmoral (Harrow, Vic) and Pingelly (WA) sites held annual field days that showcased the F1 ewe progeny, involved industry presentations, and provided demonstrations of the latest in sheep handling and data collection technologies.

Field days are a highlight of the sire evaluation calendar providing an opportunity for existing and potential sheep and wool producers to compare firsthand the progeny of sires entered at the sites. Sires selected at MLP sites are carefully chosen to be industry representative in that they reflect the main industry sheep types, breeding directions and breeding methodologies.

The range in types entered creates an opportunity to closely explore the drivers of lifetime productivity as ewe progeny are shorn, classed and joined throughout life.

It is expected that the diverse types being examined in the trial will offer a learning outcome for just about every sheep and wool business imaginable using the Merino ewe as the base.

Initial project results will be most relevant when examined at an individual site basis. As the MLP project moves past the standard sire evaluation phase, the results from the project will develop into more general decision support information with the goal of delivering greater lifetime productivity and profitability for commercial wool/meat producers.

MerinoLink hosted 75 attendees at their mid-March field day at Temora, NSW, with the crowd made up of commercial breeders, ram breeders and industry service providers. The well grown 9-month old ewe progeny from the 13 diverse industry sires showed a range in performance for many attributes. The latest in DNA collection technology, sheep handling and data collection technology was also displayed, all of which is being utilised by the MLP project to generate the valuable dataset.

In Western Australia, the **Pingelly** site welcomed a strong crowd of 60 attendees to inspect their first drop of ewes from 15 sires. Brett Jones, the chair of the site, pronounced their inaugural field day a great success: "We had a great mix of people attending the day with breeders using a range of selection approaches represented. The sheep looked

2017 **MerinoLink** field day, 'The Vale', Temora.

fantastic and were a credit to farm manager Steve Wainewright and his team."

Brett added that the site is particularly interested in comparing conception rate and lamb survival differences between sire groups next year. "The first year of reproduction data from these ewes will be interesting, but I guess we really need the next five years of natural mating to complete the full reproduction picture to add the wool story," he said.

For **Elders Balmoral**, this was their second annual MLP field day and another chance to inspect the first ever drop of F1 ewes in the MLP Project. The site hosted around 160 attendees and was described by Tom Silcock, the site's chair, as the biggest and best their site has ever hosted in the 20 years of running sire evaluations. "With 25 sires entered in the 2015 and 2016 drops the 50-way draft was a feat in auto drafting and many hands-on deck to pen up the 50 groups."

When asked about the project results to date Tom offered: "As we thought, the sheep are changing as they get older, we are litmus testing early measurements and the second year of testing is challenging some of these predictions – and that's what this project is all about."

Considerable work goes into hosting a sire evaluation field day and the MLP team would like to acknowledge and thank the site hosts and site committees for their tremendous efforts in making these days a great success.

With the fourth and fifth sites having just completed their first joinings at Macquarie (Trangie, NSW) and New England (Armidale, NSW), the MLP project will have all five sites on display during 2018. To keep in touch, visit **www.wool.com/MLP**. Ⓑ
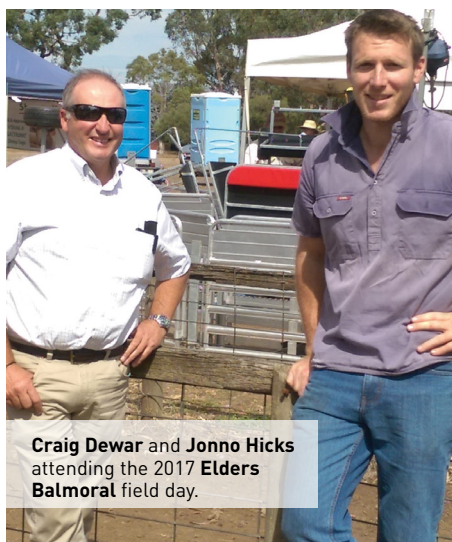
Craig Dewar and Jonno Hicks attending the 2017 Elders Balmoral field day.

2016 drop F1 ewes and attendees at the **Pingelly** field day. *PHOTO:* Farm Weekly

A 9-month old 2016 drop F1 **Pingelly** ewe.

HAVE YOUR SAY...WE NEED YOUR HELP

Noting the diverse range of sheep types and selection strategies utilised by the MLP project's participants, are there any particular traits or questions relevant to your business, or the greater sheep industry, that you would like explored? If so, we would like to hear from you.

The following table captures the annual data collected on all 5,000 F1 ewes in the project. Are there particular traits or qualities that are not listed?

Wool Measurements	Fleece weight, yield, fibre diameter, fibre diameter SD, fibre diameter CV, staple strength, staple length, comfort factor and curvature
Growth and Carcass	Live weight, eye muscle and fat depth
Disease and Welfare	Worm egg count, faecal moisture, dag, urine stain, breech cover, crutch cover, breech wrinkle
Visual Wool Traits	Fleece rot, wool colour, wool character, dust penetration, staple weathering, staple structure, fibre pigmentation, non-fibre pigmentation, recessive black and random spot
Visual Conformation Traits	Face cover, jaw, legs/feet, shoulder/back, body wrinkle
Classing	Two classings with independent sheep classers
Joining, Pregnancy, Lambing	Sire, dam, pregnancy scanning, number of lambs weaned, live weight and condition score (at pre-joining, pregnancy scanning, pre-lambing, weaning)

The project includes sires from horned and polled backgrounds; MERINOSELECT and non-MERINOSELECT breeders; ASBV trait leaders and many show winners; breeders with objectives to produce large quantities of quality wool with less emphasis on carcass attributes, while others are improving both quantity of wool, lambs and carcase; others are seeking to reduce micron and increase wool production simultaneously.

The project seeks to cover the broad range of potential commercially important objectives. BUT are your needs covered or are there attributes, groups of traits or analyses that we should be carrying out in the project or perhaps should consider in the last two joinings in the project?

Please pass on your ideas to AMSEA, AWI or the MLP Project Manager using the details provided below:

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