

MLA: Bolster sheepmeat numbers

TERRY SIM

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CLEANSKIN producers were challenged last week to achieve 150 per cent lamb weaning rates to help meet growing world demand for sheepmeat.

Meat & Livestock Australia lamb and sheepmeat research and development manager Alex Ball said the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations was forecasting world sheepmeat consumption to go up 1.6 million tonnes during the next five years.

Australia was expected to deliver 350,000t of the increase, he told 160 people at the annual Cleanskin Sheep Australia conference in Adelaide.

"Australia only produces 420,000t at the moment.

"So we could double production and still not go anywhere near the FAO forecast."

Dr Ball said Australia had to rebuild its flock - doing nothing would drive sheep numbers down.

Australian sheep producers averaged 82 per cent (weaned lambs to ewes joined) during the past five years (87pc in 2010), he said.

"To get somewhere near the supply that we need we've got to get up somewhere near 100pc weaning rates across all ewe types, just to maintain our volumes going forward.

"The cleanskin challenge that we've got for you is 150pc (weaned lambs to ewes joined), that's only a little bit isn't it?"

Dr Ball said the Australian industry value of sheep meat would reach \$4.5 billion for the first time this year. But meeting demand for lamb and sheepmeat would be a big challenge.

"We don't think the ewes are going to come forward at the rate that some people are predicting and the other big thing is that we have got to get young ewes back into the system," he said.

Dr Ball supported joining ewes at seven months, particularly in cleanskin flocks.

The average lamb carcass weight across Australia was 21 kilograms, but if this could be lifted to 25kg nationally and weaning rates to 110pc, production would approach FAO and Centre for International Economics estimates, he said.

"We're not saying that cleanskins have to drive up carcass weight, but what we are saying is that cleanskins have to do their maternal component and add their carcass weight.

Dr Ball said the new Sheepmeat Industry Strategic Plan focused on producers lifting lean meat yield by 2pc, maintaining or improving eating quality and increasing the ewe flock by 5m.

The new National Sheepmeat Production Research, Development and Extension Strategy - the blueprint for the future - focused on "getting the right animal with the right plant at the right time with the right management".

Technology supporting that strategy would include the Snipchip, able to analyse the DNA of animal to predict growth rate, eating quality and other components.

"We are basically about to redesign the genetics of the sheep industry," Dr Ball said.

He said the potential of the cleanskin industry wrestled with how well it designed its genetics.



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Courtesy Stock Journal.