One growers' approach to flystrike prevention – Scott Macansh, Deepwater Station

It's hard to know what the hardest part is about deciding to change flystrike prevention practices.

A raft of issues have to be considered and circumstances differ for every farm and every flock. For many of the sheep producers who have made their decision to change practices, they have done so and moved on to the next matter.

Indeed, some producers adjusted several seasons ago, and are now close to having mules-free flocks.

For New England woolgrower, Scott Macansh, it's all worked out.

"In one way it was a difficult decision to make the change - in that we'd been using mulesing help control breech flystrike for a long time and we were not sure of what would happen when we stopped.

"Though in another way, it wasn't hard. We thought the 'writing was on the wall' with animal rights activists increasingly lobbying overseas retailers."

"The end result was that we just stopped back in 2004 on 'Deepwater Station'.

He says in looking back, there was no one single-factor - there were several triggers.

"We were having a tough autumn and we didn't want to stress the lambs too much going into winter mulesing them.

"In 2000, we'd changed our ram genetics to selecting and using far more plain-bodied types, and in the 2004 lamb drop there were far fewer sheep with wrinkly skin.

"We'd also moved over to an intensive rotational grazing system, and as the sheep had less access to short green feed, scouring became less of an issue, and in turn, so did flies."

A key factor to reducing fly pressure is to stop scouring.

He says under those circumstances, and balancing up the pro's and con's, and considering what other measures might be required, the call was made.

"We dropped mulesing from our schedule that year. But it meant we also started thinking about what extra pieces of the jigsaw we needed to put in place to build up a package of measures for flystrike control."

The Macanshs moved to crutching twice per year.

“That’s been handy, though we wanted to do it anyway to reduce the chance of stain in the clip.

“Worms are also a factor in attracting flies as another cause of scouring. We drench test regularly to ensure we drench effectively and we’re not creating resistance problems.

“And, while rotational grazing helps control worm numbers and infection, it also means we’re monitoring the sheep even more closely.”

The fly-repellent treatment CLICK is also used on ‘Deepwater Station’ to get the lambs through the first summer without problems, and if the seasonal conditions are shaping up as possibly problematic, the hoggets are treated as well.

Scott Macansh says they haven’t had one of those exceptionally wet, humid New England summers to test the limits yet, though the sheep have come through several wet periods of two months or so without any troubles.

“We get occasional enquiries about how its going, people are interested.

“This will be the fifth year since we stopped, and we’ll have a mules-free flock in 2011. For us, it’s not been too much of a drama and we’re happy we made the change.”

The Macanshs have also moved to direct marketing of their wool through the e-wool™ company to access orders for wool from non-mulesed sheep, as at this stage there are no premiums in the auction room for this wool.

Importantly, the National Wool Declaration enables farmers to declare their practices, providing transparency between buyer and seller.

The Sheep CRC lists a suite of information on seasonal planning, breeding strategies, ram selection and day-to-day management, and is available for stud breeders and commercial producers at *www.sheepcrc.org.au*

Sheep CRC Project Leader Industry Training, Mrs Lu Hogan, says the Sheep CRC’s Information Nucleus flocks have provided vital information on flystrike management practice over the last two years.

“All progeny are non-mulesed, and with their locations at 8 sites across Australia ranging from low to high rainfall, the Sheep CRC knows what its like to run sheep with variable breech strike susceptibility.

"The information built up by the Sheep CRC focuses on an integrated approach based on using shorter-term management measures while breeding a more breech strike resistant flock."

Information includes:

• Monitoring fly activity and risk periods
• The factors that make sheep susceptible to flystrike
• Preparing a flystrike management program with planning templates and calendars
• Visually assessing sheep (ewes and rams) for breech strike risk levels
• Segmenting and managing ewe and lamb, and weaner flocks on the basis of breech wrinkle
• Using available management practises and treatments for short-term protection
• Selecting sires using visual scores and the Early Breech Wrinkle ASBV
• Marketing non-mulesed wool
• Producers making the transition - case studies
• Getting started – planning, techniques, targets and tips
• Further information and contacts

Joint training in flystrike management is being developed by the Sheep CRC and State DPI's and training course schedules will also be listed on the website.

Deepwater Station details:

- via Deepwater, New England, NSW
- area: 1600 ha
- rainfall: 700mm long term average
- carrying capacity: near 15,000 DSE's (9/DSE/ha)
- pastures: mostly 'naturalised' consisting of a range of improved and native species
- shearing: 7,500 sheep/year
- sheep enterprise: self-replacing Merino flock of 4,000 ewes plus followers; 18µ across-flock fibre diameter; wethers are sold off-the-board to woolgrowers or the meatworks
- cattle enterprise: self-replacing Hereford herd of 220 cows