



White Suffolk sheep

Farm Diversification Information Service

February, 2000

AG0879

ISSN 1329-8062

This Agriculture Note provides information on the production of White Suffolk sheep and the current state of the industry in Victoria.

Product

The White Suffolk has been developed in Australia to suit Australian conditions. It was developed from breeding programs involving the Suffolk breed initially crossed with other white breeds, mainly the Poll Dorset. Work started on a breeding program in the mid 1970s with experimentation conducted by Professor E. Roberts (University of NSW). Professor Roberts had noticed that despite the Suffolk breed being clearly the best of producing fast growing lean lambs in trials, it commanded less than 10% of the Australian prime lamb market. The main reason for this reluctance was seen to be the dark points and the reduced skin values that rightly or wrongly applied. In the 1980's other breeders also took up the challenge to develop the breed with improved quality and numbers.

The Australian White Suffolk Society was founded in 1985 by a group of dedicated breeders keen to see the breed formally get off the ground.

The Association aims to produce a breed that has all the Suffolk characteristics except the black points, while maintaining the superior growth rate, and ability to produce carcasses ideally suited to all developments in the meat industry. They should suit market areas such as traditional cuts, boneless cuts, and the live ram lamb and sheep trades. The breed is now firmly established in Australia, producing rams with excellent growth rates and carcass composition without the black points of the Suffolk. The performance of the breed is reflected in the consistently high prices received for White Suffolk Cross lambs sold in the market.

Physical requirements

Stud sheep breeding is more labour intensive than commercial production, as the sheep need to be handled more often, and rams need to be grown out for sale. Sheep yards should be sturdy as White Suffolk's are solid and they may also jump low fences. Boundary fences need to be inspected by DPI to ensure that they are sheep proof, before Brucellosis testing and subsequent accreditation can

be attained. A purpose built shearing shed is desirable, as it can also be used to house sheep for sale or show preparation, and for general handling. Besides standard sheep husbandry equipment for routine processes such as drenching and lamb marking, specialist requirements include scales, tattoo equipment and ear-marking equipment.

Enough paddocks need to be available to house rams, weaners, maiden ewes and lambing ewes. High quality pasture is essential to grow sheep out to their maximum potential, and provision should also be made for supplementary feeding of grain and hay.

Production

The Australian White Suffolk Association actively encourages members to performance record and back fat test with appropriate authorities under 'Lambplan'. The desirable breeding traits that should be pursued are less fat, larger carcasses, good conformation, fast growth and easy lambing.

Most breeders have produced White Suffolk's by selective crossbreeding between Suffolk's and white breeds (mainly Poll Dorset). Further crossbreeding allows selection for Suffolk conformation and type, and against coloured fibres in the fleece and on the points. The P.L.G. (Prime Lamb Genetics) genetic material from the University of NSW experimental flock has also been introduced into many flocks. Suffolk sheep are re-crossed with the 'white' progeny of these initial crossbreeding programs.

Numbers of stud sheep are now becoming readily available and a large gene pool is available. During 1992 U.S. genetics became available and have now been infused into a percentage of White Suffolk studs. Commercial ram buyers are becoming more discerning and they expect well-grown rams of Suffolk type, and they prefer Lambplan figures being available.

Artificial insemination is regularly used by breeders to source superior genetics made available to association members.

Marketing

There is a ready market for White Suffolk flock rams in Victoria, but surplus rams may not be sold if the Stud is inadequately promoted or if inferior quality rams are

produced. Being a new breed, would-be breeders have an opportunity to get in on the ground floor. Most flocks are small (between 25-100 ewes) so it is possible for breeders to nurture their own client base. Promotion may be by way of on property field days, setting up displays at agricultural field days, participation in shows, carcass competitions etc. Some studs also advertise in rural press or in provincial newspapers. Annual on property auctions have become a feature of some studs, and many regions have annual stock agent organised meat breed rams sales. The vast majority of rams are sold privately to lamb producers, usually with an agent organising the sale.

Financial aspects

Establishment costs are moderate. Stud White Suffolk ewes tend to range from \$100-400 each, although cast for age graded ewes (bred-up ewes) can sometimes be purchased for less. Stud rams start at about \$1000, or semen is available from \$20 per straw. For small flocks annual fees can be crippling and they need to be considered. There are fees for Australian White Suffolk Society membership, Ovine Brucellosis Eradication Scheme testing, Johnes disease testing, Lambplan participation and other performance recording costs. Surplus stud ewes are readily saleable to people increasing their flock size or to new breeders. The breed has experienced rapid growth with 234 registered pedigree

flocks Australia wide in 1995 to nearly 400 in 1998. Flock ram prices range from \$150-700 and selected stud rams have sold to \$20,000.

Organisations and contacts

Australian White Suffolk Association
PO Box 108
Goodwood SA 5034
Ph. 08 8210 5230
Fax. 08 8231 4173

References

Australian White Suffolk Association
PO Box 108
Goodwood SA 5034
Ph. 08 8210 5230
Fax. 08 8231 4173
Braidwood White Suffolk Stud
RMB R857
Grenville Vic 3352
Ph. 03 5341 4567
Fax. 03 5341 4601

Acknowledgments

Ian Knox - Alternate Directions

This publication may be of assistance to you but the State of Victoria and its employees do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.