



South African meat merinos

Farm Diversification Information Service (Bendigo) & Geoff Castleman (Walpeup)

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This Agriculture Note provides information on the production of South African meat merino sheep in Victoria.

Product

This breed of sheep was originally known as the German Mutton Merino. Today it is often known as 'SAM'.

The first animals were imported from Germany to South Africa in 1932 by the Department of Agriculture to improve the quality of wool and meat from sheep in South Africa. The breed was recognised in 1971 when the name was changed to South African Mutton Merino.

A breeding program utilising a variety of crosses was set up at the Dohne Agricultural Research Station near Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape in 1939. The crosses between local merinos and the German Mutton Merino were very successful and the resulting progeny grew well in the grassland regions around Dohne.

Dohne sheep were exported to Australia as 'South African Mutton Merinos'. A breed society has been established and the sheep in Australia are now called 'South African Meat Merinos'.

In South Africa it was bred to produce a suitable slaughter lamb at an early age while producing good quality wool (of 23 micron or less) without the input of additional feeding. The breed is polled and the wool classified as strong to medium. In Australia it offers farmers with an additional source of genetic material to produce sheep meat from a large framed sheep with a long loin. The breed could be used as a source for heavier lambs, as fat is not laid down in the carcase to a much later age than other sheep breeds.

Physical requirements

The breed is known for its adaptability and efficient feed conversion, being popular in South Africa in feedlots. Its adaptation to a wide variety of climates is a major reason for its success in South Africa, and it is expected that the breed will perform well in a wide variety of climates in Australia. Lambing percentages of more than 150% are claimed to be common, but it is to be expected that this would be under good grazing conditions.

Production

There has been mixed results with varying lambing drops. The South African Meat Merino is not a seasonal breeder so three lamb drops would be possible in two years.

However, there have been other instances where animals would produce only one lamb per year in Australia. Ewes have good maternal instinct and high milk production. Mature ewes will grow to about 75kg and rams to over 100kg. Ewes will produce 3.5 to 4.5 kilograms of medium/strong wool

South African meat merinos have been developed as a versatile, hardy dual-purpose breed, which should adapt well to a large number of regions in Victoria.

Marketing

The number of animals in Australia is not large at present and a number of evaluations with the breed are taking place. Currently the breed does not offer very much to improve prime lamb production that could not be obtained from other breeds. The breed would appear a suitable animal for the more extensive low rainfall regions of Australia.

As with most new breeds rams will initially fetch a premium, as numbers are low. As the breed is largely unknown in Australia, potential breeders will need to be introduced at farm field days, open days etc. If the sheep perform well under Australian conditions they could prove very popular as the commercial balance starts to swing back from wool production to meat.

Financial aspects

South African mutton merinos have almost entirely replaced British breeds as terminal sires in the harsh regions of South Africa. Australian breeders will need to compare the financial returns they currently make using other breeds. The best way to do this would be with limited introduction of South African genetics to allow offspring to be compared. The demand for stud rams is still largely untested so a careful market appraisal, of who the potential clients would be, should be done before starting a stud flock.

Organisations and contacts

Geoff Castleman
Business & Commercialisation Manager
Dept of Natural Resources and Environment
Walpeup Vic 3507
Ph. 03 5091 7200
Fax. 03 5389 7210

Kevin Crook
Clarkes Road
Ouyen Vic 3490
Ph. 03 5092 1037
Fax. 03 5092 2345

Laurie Harrison
'Glenwood'
Cobaw Vic 3442
Ph. 03 5427 0500
Fax. 03 5427 0685

Hurstmead Pastoral Co Pty Ltd
'Brooklyn'
RMB 523
Wagga Wagga NSW 2650
Contact: Bob Chambers
Ph. 02 6928 1123
Mob. 018 881 127
Fax. 02 6928 1127
E-mail: Hurstmead@bigpond.com

J.C. McMaster, Dohne merino Breed Society of South Africa
PO Box 61
Stutterheim 4930, S.S.A.
Ph. 0027-0436-31330
Fax. 0027-0436-31931

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Acknowledgments

Ian Knox - Alternate Directions

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