

East Friesian gamble pays off

By ANNABELLE BEALE

THE proof is in the production for the Foster family at Casterton – the introduction of New Zealand bloodlines into their flock has boosted fertility by 30 per cent.

On a mission to improve lambing percentages, survival and carcase yield in their Haven Park flock, the Fosters explored breeds to work as a fertility kicker in their composite flock and took a gamble with the relatively unknown East Friesian.

Graham, Shirley, Rick, and Nancy Foster introduced the breed to the Western District in 1997 with New Zealand semen, and in 2012 bought breeding ewes from Prospect, Kyneton.

They say the breed has seen growing interest for its good mothering and fertility ability.

It is a predominantly prime lamb operation, which runs 4000 breeding ewes, 200 Poll Dorset stud ewes, and 70 East Friesian stud ewes across its 1140-hectare property.

"We were looking to increase our production and hence fertility was the key driver," Mr Foster said.

"So we looked at the East Friesian for the fertility but also because with the fertility you need to be able to feed those extra lambs and the East Friesians have the milking ability which was really important."

Grappling with genetics in the past eight years has paid dividends, as the Fosters transitioned their flock from pure Corriedales to East Friesian,



BREED BOOST: Rick and Nancy Foster, Haven Park, Casterton, with their children Hugh and Alison, have been able to boost their flock's fertility by 30pc with East Friesian sheep.

Corriedale, and Border Leicester-cross ewes, and used Poll Dorset as the terminal sire.

"We are hitting domestic and export weights, with most lambs being turned off at 26-28 kilograms at five months by November, and fertility rates consistently average 140pc," Mr Foster said.

"The season is starting to turn by end of November so we sell them off as sucker lambs."

The family – respected veterans on the Corriedale show circuit – made a successful Friesian debut when they won reserve champion for their East

Friesian at the Australian Sheep & Wool Show at Bendigo last month.

The Corriedale-cross was introduced for the skin and wool type, which Rick said was to avoid loss of wool type and the ordinary skins often seen in composite flocks.

They were maintained for the base wool quality, black feet, and good structure as a sound cross-breeding base, while the East Friesian fertility, milk, mothering and ease of lambing was to complement the Corriedale base.

East Friesian is one of the world's

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East Friesian hits targets

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oldest sheep breeds which originates from the German-Dutch border. It was introduced in Australia in 1996.

The breed is renowned for its fertility, obtaining figures of about 220pc, and regarded as the world's most productive milking breed, producing 500 to 600 litres in a 210 to 230-day lactation.

The milk is known to be rich and creamy with twice the vitamin and protein content of cow or goat milk.

Rick said general assumptions about East Friesians was the leanness, when used as a pure bred, but said it had seen greater success as a commercial cross-bred.

The Poll Dorset as the terminal sire is used for the high growth rates, red meat yield, skin quality, seasonal resilience and their ability to finish stock as a prime article.

It is the largest terminal prime lamb sire in the country, and Mr Foster said this allowed breeders to identify superior traits within their large genetic pool.

"Our sheep have developed the flexibility to turn off lambs at all carcass weights in a short amount of time," he said.

With targets for consistency and even lines of lambs and ewes, the Fosters are maintaining 28-31 micron and cutting 5-6kg of wool annually.

"When the lamb job was humming two years ago, hitting the \$6 mark and better, people thought wool was a byproduct but you have to remember everything has its day," Mr Foster said.

"You need to be mindful that it costs you to shear them and as long as you are cutting a reasonable weight, then it is worth it and it will put a bit on your bottomline."

Ewes are joined in

December at a higher percentage to rams then scanned for multiples, singles, and triplets in March for a June lambing in order to manage feed ratios.

"Putting them initially out at 2pc and then after two weeks adding another 2pc, you get a tight lambing," Mr Foster said.

Last year, 14-month-old ewe lambs were scanned at 86pc in-lamb in June for an August lambing last year, which Mr Foster said were good statistics following a tough summer.

Last year, they sold 5mo lambs off ewe lambs which were weaned on dry lucerne at 27kg.

A savvy business approach to operation means any animal not making a profit is removed, including a rigorous dry ewe culling program which Mr Foster attributes to high fertility rates.

Following a mineral and cydectin long-acting drench and vaccination pre-lambing, ewes are scanned in March for a June lambing, and any dry ewe gets rejoined for a spring lambing.

"Anything dry goes - we cull the bad mothers," he said.

"We breed all our replacement ewes and don't need to buy any in.

"The high-performance East Friesian requires good feed management, which is supported by years of pasture renovation across Haven Park to accommodate the feed intake. The property predominantly boasts good fattening pasture with rye and clover, with phalaris featuring on the heavier country.

The Fosters direct-drilled with annual ryegrass for hay and grazing, and have an efficient fertiliser history using rates up to 200kg of



CROSS LAMBS: Poll Dorset-cross lambs weighing 27.4kg carcass weight. The Poll Dorset is used as the terminal sire for its high growth rates, red meat yield, skin quality, seasonal resilience, and ability to finish stock as a prime article.

single super with lime at 1 tonne/ha, depending on soil test results.

Mr Foster supplements feed through the summer with 100pc home-grown silage and hay. Prime lambs are sold direct over-hooks to ALC, Colac and Swift, Bordertown, and an October property sale of about 50 Poll Dorset and 50 East Friesian-cross rams.

Despite an ever-evolving successful prime lamb

business, the Foster family tradition still exists in the operation, with 210 Hereford cows infused with Simmental, seen on the property.

Mr Foster said this was to ensure a "few eggs are in different baskets", and to have a split workload.

"Our long-term aim is to consolidate what we are doing. We still have plenty of room for improvement and growth," he said.