

Rebuilding the flock: Is purchasing ewes an option to consider?

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With prolonged dry conditions, many farms have reduced sheep numbers over recent months and years. While a flexible stocking rate is critical during tough seasons, it is just as important to respond quickly as conditions return to “normal”. Stocking rate is closely linked to profitability, so rebuilding numbers as soon as possible can deliver a significant lift to business performance.

One of the most obvious ways to rapidly rebuild ewe numbers is through purchasing stock. Buying ewes allows stocking rates to increase quickly, but it also comes with a number of important considerations.

The first — and most obvious — is cost. When you are looking to buy ewes, chances are everyone else is too. Sheep prices tend to follow seasonal conditions, and strong seasons usually mean higher ewe prices. However, high prices shouldn't automatically rule the option out. With the lamb market also currently running hot, the additional lambs produced from purchased ewes can help recoup the initial outlay relatively quickly. Even without record-breaking lamb prices, the equation is often still favourable — assuming, of course, that your crystal ball suggests reasonable prices when the lambs from your purchased ewes hit the market.

Purchasing ewes can also create opportunities for change within your business. This might be as simple as sourcing similar bloodlines with improved genetics, or it could involve a more significant shift — a new bloodline or even a new breed. For some, buying in ewes provides a low-risk way to trial something different while the rest of the flock remains unchanged. A chance to dip a toe in the water.

Importantly, purchased ewes don't have to be the “perfect” fit. They may simply serve as a cashflow generator, joined exclusively to terminal sires for their entire time on the property. Viewing them through this lens can significantly widen your purchasing options and reduce upfront costs. A classic example is the preference for Border Leicester × Merino ewes, when White Suffolk × Merino ewes can often be purchased for considerably less. While they may not be the first choice on paper, well-bred alternatives can still be highly productive. An open mind can lead to a less open chequebook.

Of course, purchasing ewes is not without risk. What happens if prices fall and the payback period stretches out? And perhaps more importantly, what biosecurity risks are being introduced? Disease, worms, and weeds can all hitch a ride onto your property if purchases aren't carefully managed.

Buying ewes can be a powerful way to rapidly rebuild flock numbers, restore profitability, and introduce positive change — but it requires clear thinking and disciplined risk management. Assess all of your options, all of the risks, and grab hold of the opportunities when they present themselves. Who knows, you might even find some sheep that you like more than your own.