

Case study: Tom Small from St Arnaud, Vic

Woolgrower Tom Small from St Arnaud Victoria is putting his shearing practices on the line to help other woolgrowers save money by making small on-farm changes. He is one of five woolgrowers featured in a new DVD 'Pick of the Draft' produced by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX). The DVD puts hard dollar values on poor sheep management and shearing practices and estimates the money that can be saved through simple improvements.



The program isn't just another training program, according to DVD presenter Scott McGregor. 'It will be great entertainment as well as showing growers how simple steps can make a big difference in profitability,' he says. For Tom Small of 'Tottington', the difference to his profitability is \$20,600 gained through changing his shearing time and presenting his sheep in drafted mobs.

The DVD presents a computer-based financial model developed by AWEX to show woolgrowers how much cutting corners with their wool clip is really costing them. The model is based on an average woolgrower running a flock of 3,000 Merino sheep, cutting 4.5 kilograms of 19 micron greasy wool. The total clip is 13,500 kilograms.

Tom and Jen Small run a flock of 10,000 Merino sheep on their property 'Tottington'. They shear in the oldest working shearing shed in Victoria and one of the oldest in Australia. In 'Pick of the Draft', Tom talks about the improvements he has made through additional measurement, phasing out brands, time of shearing and drafting sheep into mobs.

For the Smalls, changing the time of shearing was one of the most significant steps in improving profitability.

'Back in the 1990s we had a real problem with our tensile strength, which was down around in the mid 20s with a mid break of 80%. That wasn't what the processors were looking for,' says Tom.

'We decided to change from shearing in spring to shearing in mid-May. We now get tensile strength up around 40 newtons per kilotex and very little of it has a mid break of more than 20%. When we go down to the auction rooms and our line of wool goes on, away the bidding goes. It's been a strong financial gain for us.'

Lionel Plunkett, senior market analyst for AWEX, confirms that adjusting shearing time can result in good financial returns.

'If you adjust your time of shearing to improve staple strength from 28 to 35 newtons per kilotex, you could improve your returns by 20c per kilogram,' he says. 'On the 3,000 head flock we use as a model in the DVD, that equates to \$2,700.' For Tom to increase his staple strength to 40 newtons, this could mean a saving of up to \$20,000 for changing or adjusting his shearing time.

Lionel recommends additional measurement of wool for staple length and strength. 'If you have combing length wool, you should measure it,' he says. 'It will help to increase the competition for your wool.'

The Smalls now carry out additional measurement on all their wool. 'It's very important to measure the results from what you're doing with things like tensile strength,' says Tom. 'It only costs a little more and it makes a real difference to the end product.'

Tom says he used to brand his cull ewes that he bred cross-bred lambs from, which resulted in a lot of additional work at shearing time to ensure the brands were taken out. Now he has replaced brands with ear tags, solving the problem of wool staining.

Drafting sheep into mobs for age, sex and type makes the process easier for the wool classer, shearers and shed staff – and can make a major saving for woolgrowers.

'If you're not presenting your sheep to the sheds in properly drafted lines, discounts for the mixed qualities and mixed length could lead to a loss of 15c per kilogram,' says Lionel. 'On our 3,000 head flock this equates to a loss of \$2000. And I can show you examples of discounts of up to \$1 per kilogram.'

Tom and Jen are diligent about presenting their sheep in individual mobs.

'We grow out wethers to their full age and we also have ewes, so we've got a lot of different mobs,' says Tom. 'When we're shearing we start with the oldest wethers and move down through their age groups. Then we move up through the age groups of ewes.'

'When we're moving between mobs and age groups in that way, if we haven't got quite enough pieces from the last group, then we can blend them in because they are very similar wools. This lets us maximise the bale weights.'

According to the AWEX model, increasing the average bale weight from 160 to 180 kilograms can save almost \$600 on packs, testing, freight and selling costs for a 3,000 head flock.

The generous tips, insight and advice given by Tom and the other woolgrowers in the 'Pick of the Draft' DVD demonstrate the simple ways woolgrowers can keep costs down and maximise profits.

Image: Tom and Jen Small with daughter Lara, 'Tottington', St Arnaud, Victoria