

# MAKING THE TRANSITION TO A CEASED MULESING FLOCK

## Deborah Maxwell writes:

Breech strike is a killer – not just of sheep, but also profits. So preventing breech strike with mulesing was best practice for our property's sheep and bank balance, just as it has been for decades in many other Merino enterprises.

As flock owners, our days are filled with prevention or early treatment of diseases. Mulesing is one such prevention.

But the world has challenged us to look again.

When my husband and I took up that challenge to prevent breech strike without mulesing our lambs in the high summer rainfall New England region, first and foremost in our minds was "How many might become struck and will we be able to deal with it?"

We did successfully stop mulesing our superfine Merinos nearly 10 years ago, but no year has been the same and we are still learning and fine-tuning our management.

Don't expect to get it exactly right the first time, and be prepared and flexible to change with different seasons.

While a written plan is ideal, you can start right now by reading the 10 steps to the right and reflecting on the questions and points under each one.

Importantly, if you have family and staff involved in your sheep management, include them too – just start the discussion at smoko with, "How about we plan to stop mulesing?" then keep talking and take it one step at a time.

Don't just stop mulesing! You might spend the next year thinking about and discussing the points to the right and some flocks might need a concerted breeding effort to make them less susceptible before stopping.

Another great reference is the 2018 report by AWI's Geoff Lindon, *Planning to move to a non mulesed Merino enterprise*, (see opposite page) which outlines the key learnings from woolgrowers who have moved to a non-mulesed enterprise – real stories from real people who have taken the plunge.

Finally, FlyBoss ([www.flyboss.com.au](http://www.flyboss.com.au)) has a wealth of information and tools to help you on this journey.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
[www.flyboss.com.au](http://www.flyboss.com.au)

**ParaBoss Executive Officer and Merino sheep breeder Deborah Maxwell has ceased mulesing** on her property at Guyra in the high summer rainfall New England region. In this article, she outlines 10 steps of transitioning to a ceased-mulesing flock and identifies some of the key questions and points for each step.

## 1. IDENTIFY THE FLYSTRIKE RISK PERIODS ON YOUR PROPERTY

- When is my seasonal flystrike risk?
- How does my shearing time affect risk?
- Can my shearing time be optimised, considering: wool production goals, shearer availability, wool length at lambing and joining, minimising flystrike risk, grass seed, dags risk and season?

Use the FlyBoss Compare Management Tool ([at www.flybosstools.org.au](http://www.flybosstools.org.au)) to assess your flystrike risk.

## 2. ASSESS THE FLYSTRIKE SUSCEPTIBILITY OF YOUR CURRENT SHEEP

- What is my current rate of flystrike?
- How and when would that change without mulesing, crutching or chemicals?
- What traits do I need to change about my sheep? eg fleece rot, breech wrinkle, dag, breech cover, wool type, wool colour, conformation, urine stain, polls/horns.
- Would I improve them through breeding, management or both?

Refer to FlyBoss Breeding and Selection pages ([www.flyboss.com.au/breeding-and-selection](http://www.flyboss.com.au/breeding-and-selection)) to assess your flock.

## 3. IDENTIFY YOUR NEW IDEAL SHEEP AND HAVE THE CONVICTION TO BREED THEM

- Which traits do I need to focus on?
- What will make the biggest, fastest gain, what's next?
- How much change is required?
- Where can I get the information?
  - Wether trials
  - MERINOSELECT ([www.sheepgenetics.org.au](http://www.sheepgenetics.org.au))
  - Merino Superior Sires ([www.merinosuperiorsires.com.au](http://www.merinosuperiorsires.com.au))
  - RamSelect ([www.ramselect.com.au](http://www.ramselect.com.au))

- Merino field days, shows and sales
- Advisors
- By asking those already not mulesing and with low rates of flystrike

- How will I make the move? How might I break long-established relationships and build new ones with ram breeders?

Refer to FlyBoss Breeding and Selection pages ([www.flyboss.com.au/breeding-and-selection](http://www.flyboss.com.au/breeding-and-selection)) to see what is achievable.

## 4. IDENTIFY NEW OR MODIFIED PRACTICES THAT COULD BE USED

- Which traits will need to be better managed?
- What are the management options for them?
- How do those options fit with my whole business? Consider labour, facilities and equipment, cost, skills.
- How might I have to do them differently to now? Consider method and timing.
- What's my new management shortlist?

Use the FlyBoss Tools ([www.flybosstools.org.au](http://www.flybosstools.org.au)) to see how management changes on your property will affect your flock's flystrike risk and also optimise your treatment times.

## 5. REVIEW WHETHER YOU AND YOUR TEAM HAVE WHAT IT TAKES

- Am I part of my team?
- Do I share the goal and the journey?
- How can I inspire then?
- Do we really know how and when, not just what to do?
- Do we have the know-how, equipment, time and determination?
- What are the attitudes of our shearers?

Consider joining a producer group ([www.wool.com/networks](http://www.wool.com/networks)) or attending training.

## 6. LEARN WHAT YOU MIGHT NEED

- Am I set in my ways or open-minded, and will I accept critique, ideas, new or alternative ways, and help?
- Where do I learn more? Consider new information sources and training options.
- Do I know what's needed based on risk and impact? Plan even for low risk events if they are high impact.

FlyBoss ([www.flyboss.com.au](http://www.flyboss.com.au)) has a wealth of information on flystrike prevention and management.

## 7. SURROUND YOURSELF WITH SUPPORT

- Who's on the money? Find the performers: whether they be experts, advisers or other producers.
- Sign up, logon, watch, listen and ask.
- Assess those in your business or providing services to you on what they achieve, rather than what they say.

## 8. BE PREPARED AND FLEXIBLE

- "Expect the best, plan for the worst, and prepare to be surprised."
- What could go wrong and how likely is that? Know all your options, even for the less likely problems.
- Am I ready? Have know-how, staff, equipment and products on hand or quickly available for the likely issues – and not too far away for less likely problems.
- Can I handle a change of plan? Being prepared for changes makes for less stress and a better outcome.

## 9. TAKE THE PLUNGE, BUT KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL

- Are you putting off the change? Recognise procrastination.
- Don't be paralysed by a need for perfection.
- If you have gone through the earlier steps: stop planning, start doing: 100% success is never assured.
- But don't relax just yet: Keep an eye on the ball because flystrike happens quickly.
- Information and planning reduces risk and anxiety.

## 10. REVIEW, IMPROVE AND REJOICE

- Are you asking why and how? Ask "why did that happen, how can we do it better?"
- Are you prepared to do it differently next time?
- Do you celebrate and enjoy the small wins as well as the large?



Unmulesed hogget rams from the same non mulesed superfine/fine flock. If you need to select from mulesed rams, neck wrinkle is a good indicator for breech wrinkle.

## PLANNING TO MOVE TO A NON MULESED MERINO ENTERPRISE

A new AWI report that is intended to assist woolgrowers in planning to move to a non mulesed Merino enterprise is available in hard copy and online.



The 16-page report outlines the key learnings from a number of woolgrowing enterprises, from a diverse range of environments and Merino types, that have moved to a non mulesed enterprise.

While mulesing has been shown to reduce breech strike by 90%, in 2016/17 7% of the Australian Merino clip (less than 24.5 microns) was declared as non mulesed through AWEX's National Wool Declaration. Moving to a non mulesed enterprise isn't easy, however there is a trend to non mulesed wool. Key learnings to keep in mind from these businesses when considering a move to a non mulesed Merino enterprise include:

- It is important to have a detailed plan in place that has the support of everyone in your business – including staff, contractors, shearers, livestock agents and ram suppliers.
- The business needs to be brave, organised and determined to make it work in the early years.
- Moving to a non mulesed enterprise often requires fundamental change to the whole business. **B**

### MORE INFORMATION

The manual is available at [www.wool.com/flystrikelatest](http://www.wool.com/flystrikelatest) or request a free hard copy version from the AWI Helpline on 1800 070 099.