



At Perola Park, Merinos have been infused with the meatier South African Dohne.

# Steering sheep along the organic country road

By SARAH WOOLDRAGE

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**M**AC DRYSDALE'S 35,000-acre Augathella property Perola Park in south-west Queensland has been in the family since 1915.

However, it has not been until the past five years that organic production has taken place.

Mac spent 30 years as a conventional sheep (wool) grazier before making the switch to organic lamb production – a change that was prompted by his belief that “what was relevant a decade ago may not be appropriate for future agricultural production”.

“Our property has been grazed consistently for about 125 years, and being in a semi arid region this led us to become very conservative in our use of natural resources.

“When you are not receiving the same pasture response from rain as you did 20 years ago, it leads you to run less stock. With less stock, we had to increase the productivity of remaining stock and seek a higher return per animal to remain viable.”

Organic production came onto Mac's radar after he began to challenge the reliance on subjective sheep-classing methods for breeding ewes.

By focusing on building a hardier flock, he

was able, over a number of years, to select for improvement in a number of genetic traits, fine-down his sheep's clip (thereby making it more valuable for wool), increase the body weight of ewes, increase lambing by 30% and better control blowflies without chemicals.

He says genetic controlling is a simple process of elimination: “Any sheep infected by flystrike is culled.”

He says in the first couple of years culled sheep ran into the hundreds.

“Over time this was reduced to virtually zero, where-upon jetting (treating sheep with insecticide to control flystrike) was not required.”

Careful selection has allowed Mac to eliminate chemical use on Perola Park for well over 10 years, and the originally wool-bred Merino flock is now infused with the meatier South African Dohne.

“My aim now is to produce ewes that will turn off a fast-maturing prime lamb.

“The Dohne was introduced to the flock five years ago.

“The quick-maturing physiology of the Dohne enables us to turn off a better lamb with less pressure on the grazing system in an arid region,” he says.

As a result, Perola's organic meat

operations have flourished, attracting strong demand and premiums. "Our non-organic neighbours are receiving up to \$70 per lamb.

"For our best lambs, we are receiving a 30% premium, clear of costs, on these prices."

However, Mac notes that such an attractive premium requires a number of variables to fall into line.

"I am always concerned that I may not be able to get the lambs into prime condition due to seasonal conditions, and for our lesser lambs the conventional market does compete very well with the prices we receive," he says.

"Additionally, we must have numbers – at least 440 head per contract to reduce cartage costs (a 600-kilometre run) – and there is only one wholesaler who can handle these numbers; therefore, there is no organic competition (in terms of processing)."

Mac says the organic market is also one which must be chased hard.

"When I was farming conventionally I relied on agents to sell my sheep. However, when I shifted to organics I was farming organically for the philosophical reasons as opposed to the marketing gains."

He says without relying on agents to sell sheep, the onus falls on growers to find their own markets.

He says for Perola, gaining ACO organic certification was an important marketing advantage.

"We sought certification for two reasons: we believed that the principals of organic production were worth supporting and we wanted maximum value for our stock."

Perola Park also embarked on organic wool production, with less success.

"The return was only a 5%-10% premium. Producing organic wool is extremely difficult – the lice population in Australia, especially in western Queensland, is a huge issue at the moment," he says.

"After five years of wool production, we had to let it go.

"Competing with lice control and not receiving a meaningful premium makes it extremely difficult to keep organic status.

"Also, the conventional wool industry in general is at a crossroads. Many producers are changing from Merinos to Dorpers because the price of wool does not offset the labour-intensive Merino. Wool production is going to be a challenge unless we see a lift of around 40% in wool prices."

## Board member for 32 years

Not content on solely being a farmer, Mac has invested the past 32 years in developing his extensive knowledge of corporate governance and organisational change, helping grow companies through many roles as a board member and chairman.

Mac began his 'board' career when he represented the Australian Wool Growers Association and other organisations at a national and international level for 20 years, spanning the years 1976-96. He spent the last five as chairman of both the Australian Wool Corporation and the International Wool Secretariat.

Later, he was invited to the board of both the Mitre 10 Group and Australian retail giant Country Road (which he eventually chaired for six years).

Currently, Mac is chairman of civil engineering company Seymour



Mac Drysdale, owner, Perola Park.

Whyte (a partner in the construction of Brisbane's new Hale Street Link and Ipswich motorway in Queensland).

He says his time spent on such a diverse range of boards has taught him lessons which are now useful in both farming and the organic sector.

"When I was chairman of the Australian Wool Corporation it was a very difficult time for the industry. It was, among other things, where I learned that industries and businesses under pressure don't necessarily make the best decisions and changes are best made when the business is in a position of strength. In the retail sector – where things are highly competitive, logistically complex and high-cost – I quickly gained invaluable knowledge in the

lessons of consumer demand, the simplest being that you need to market a product with the knowledge that consumer purchase is based on wants, needs and affordability – a consideration that I have now taken with me into the marketing of our organic lamb."

He says he also saw the benefits of modernising brands and supply chains to deal with increased competition when he helped oversee Mitre 10's response to escalating pressure from Bunnings.

"It is important that a company has strong board direction and representation to oversee implementation of company strategies. Decisions should be made to benefit the company (or sector) as a whole." ☺

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