



Non-mulesing possible: Tasmanian farmer

By HELENA BOGLE

FARMERS who think running non-mulesed Merinos is out of the question should have a chat to Tasmanian sheep farmer Bruce Michael.

Since moving to his 4100 hectare property from South Australia in 2001, Mr Michael has been working towards having non-mulesed Merinos and has demonstrated that it is possible.

At the recent Sheep Updates held at the University Club of WA, Mr Michael spoke about the change and the rewards that go with non-mulesed sheep and the many hurdles that he's overcome.

Mr Michael runs a 12,000 head fine Merino flock at Murrayfield, which is situated on Tasmania's Bruny Island - the most southern property in Australia.

Mr Michael said because the property was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation for the benefit of the local community he's required to run the business using the best business practices.

"We decided to cease mulesing on Murrayfield after 2004, not because of the response by PETA, that was only a small aspect," Mr Michael said.

"But because the property was situated in a rapid growing tourist area and nearly all the paddocks were very close to the main tourist road, it was one of a local influence.

"The move to non-mulesed Merinos is a holistic approach and there are many issues that are intertwined to enable this to



happen.

"It has not cost us money but in fact has been an income earner and made us better managers."

To manage the issue of moving away from mulesing and being successful in the transition, Mr Michael had to be vigilant about dag control, wool colour and breech wrinkle.

Dag control includes energy management, genetics and pasture type.

Due to the rough climate conditions, Murrayfield can receive two or three days of snow a year and on average 600mm of rainfall every year. It is therefore vital the sheep have sufficient energy.

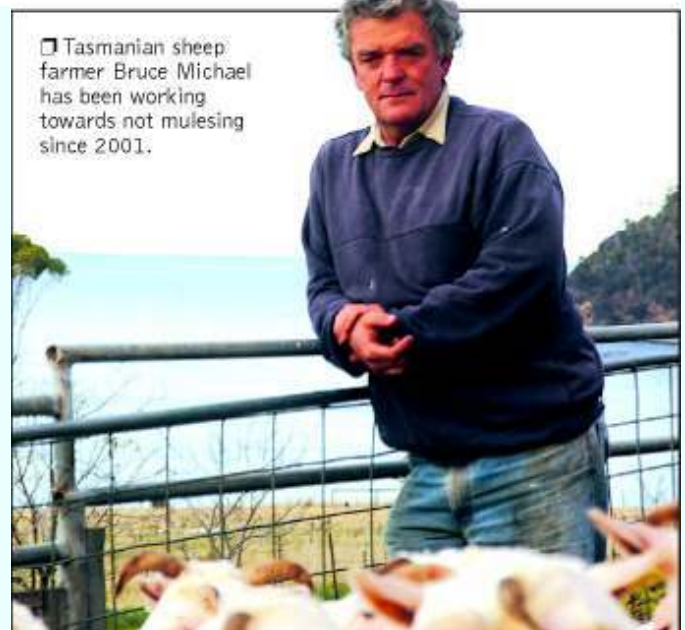
When five per cent of the Murrayfield flock died in August of 2002 and 2005, Mr Michael discovered that energy management is vital during the winter months because there is less daylight, and without energy, the sheep are unable to resist worms.

"Through the winter we feel we are very deficient in energy in our production system," he said.

"This lack of energy reduces the immunity level of our sheep to fight off worm damage; our main reason for scouring and dags.

"Worm control is about energy management."

To control worms and



Tasmanian sheep farmer Bruce Michael has been working towards not mulesing since 2001.

therefore stop death rates, Mr Michael has had to focus on condition scoring ewes, grain production, pregnancy testing and pasture improvement.

Due to the soaring grain prices in Tasmania, Mr Michael decided to grow his own grain so they always have a good supply.

"Grain production is critical for us to supply a source of energy through the winter, but with grain prices in Tasmania usually \$100 above mainland prices, we decided to grow our own grain," Mr Michael said.

"We use the money saved to offset some of the costs of the pasture renovation costs, and because we have more grain on hand we can increase the level of grain going to the sheep."

Mr Michael said a breeding plan established in 2002 had enabled them to have sheep

with the correct characteristics to stop mulesing.

The Murrayfield breeding objectives include reducing body wrinkle, improving wool colour, improving wool style and length, increasing body weight, increasing fleece weight and maintaining micron.

The Murrayfield management program consists of spring lambing, weaning in December, crutching in February, mating in April, shearing in May and a second crutching in October.

"The day to day management of the flock has not altered in any substantial matter except for an extra crutching of the hoggets in the spring," he said.

"We found that once the sheep get past the hogget stage they do tend to plain up and become much better to manage, especially in regards to dags."