

SHEEP FREEZE BRANDING

“Westvale”, a property run by the Blanch family since 1907, is situated on the top of the Great Dividing Range in northern New South Wales. Water drains into the MacLeay to the east and the Namoi and Gwyder to the west. Westvale ranges from 1050/1100 mts above sea level and comprises fine granite soils without rock.

Westvale has the type of sheep that produce a stylish superfine fleece cutting good weights for their type. With fly strike prevalent in our wet summers the Blanch family commenced traditional mulesing some 65 years ago. We were one of the first to initiate the uptake of pain mitigation products (*Trisolfen*) in 2006 to provide further improved animal welfare outcomes. Whilst not being a practice we personally enjoyed, mulesing had been very effective in our overall blowfly and stain management of our flock for that period of time providing assistance in maintaining healthy and productive animals for their lifetime.

Now in 2021, it is well understood that market and consumer expectations must be married with our own personal goals of providing the best possible welfare outcomes for our highly valued stock. As a result, we felt it was time to investigate alternatives to traditional mulesing and opted for a change.

In 2019 we did a trial run using Liquid Nitrogen (early days of *Freeze Branding*) to modify the breech. We were impressed with the results so after a year of poor lambing (due to drought) we decided again to do our larger drop of hoggets (5months old) in March 2021. Crutched one month beforehand, the job was contracted to *AgVet Innovations* owned by John Steinfort who also performed the trial operation 2 years previously.

The hoggets were given an injection of *Meloxicam*, 20mg/ml as they entered the cradle. The only other treatment given to the hoggets was to administer an injection as part of our extensive *Barbervax* program. We noticed that after the *Freeze Branding* treatment the sheep walked away in a normal, uninhibited manner and looked for grass to eat as soon as they left the yards in which the operation occurred.

Observation of the *Freeze Branded* stock the following day showed no stiffness or slowness in movement which has convinced us that the sheep will recover without any setback, as opposed to what we were witnessing with traditional mulesing. The procedure of *Freeze Branding* is much more costly than mulesing but we believe the benefits of the minimal setback to the animal and

the resulting weight gains, fly protection and increased and unaffected wool growth will far outweigh the cost. Having a process that also does not require the rudimentary cutting of our animals and no bleeding or creation of an open wound was also a huge attraction to us.

We would be quite comfortable to see a separate category created on the NWD for Freeze Branded sheep so as not to jeopardize those people who have bred sheep for no modification. However, from our positive firsthand experience to date, we firmly believe the process shows a marked improvement in animal welfare outcomes when compared to traditional mulesing and we would like to see it identified separately as such.

We intend to continue to employ Freeze Branding on our hoggets while ever we continue to experience the animal welfare and productivity benefits witnessed so far. Of course, acceptance of the process and a positive reflection of this in the market price, linked also with our wool quality, would be a secondary, but greatly appreciated added benefit.

As an additional but important comment, the shearing teams are happy with the modification method of the breech (less cutting of loose skin/more relaxed animals) and as quality wool producers we enjoy the absence of dark fibres and chemical residue in our wool.

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