AUSTRALIA'S AGRIBUSINESS MAGAZINE

AgJournal

MARCH 2020

THE MAN WHO FEEDS THE WORLD

ALMOND DEMAND GOES NUTS

IS CHINA STILL THE ANSWER?

FARM SALES RUN HOT

FLOCK STAR

CHARLIE DE FEGELY IS A GIANT OF AUSTRALIA'S SHEEPMEAT INDUSTRY

AUSTRALIAN AGRIBUSINESS TOP 50

BIGGEST PLAYERS REVEALED

CHARLES IN CHARGE

Charlie de Fegely has built a standout business by letting his land rest, writes SUE NEALES

NO LAMB wanting or deserving of a long life would dare be born a singleton on Charlie de Fegely's family property near Ararat in western Victoria.

Only twins are kept to become part of the 9000-head core breeding flock at Quamby farm, and only then if they are lucky enough to be born female.

But Charlie de Fegely, 62, is no ruthless grazier. Rather he is determined to look after the pastures on his 1600-hectare property and adjacent leased land, as he knows they are the secret to the success of his thriving prime lamb business.

> **'Our focus is on long-term sustainability and not harming the farm'**

Each year, as many as 13,000 lambs are born in wintery July on Quamby, and reared alongside their ewe mothers on rich carefully managed clover-based pastures during late winter and spring, sheltered among ancient red gums in the shadow of gentle Mount Langi Ghiran.

A speedy 100 days later, just before Melbourne Cup and the arrival of summer with its hot dry north winds, 10,000 of the new lambs are sold off the farm weighing a hefty 40 kilograms each. They are bought mainly by eager feedlotters, spread from Tasmania to southern NSW, keen to fatten and "finish" the highly prized lambs on grain in a few short weeks ready for Christmas eating.

The rapid and timely turnoff of so many lambs allows the de Fegelys to effectively "shut the farm down" over summer to protect pasture ground cover, future feed and soil fertility by keeping only the central breeding flock on the property.

"We are a low-input, low-cost-of-production farming system but we produce a lot of lambs because of the way we farm," says de Fegely, who runs Quamby with his wife, Lizzie, and son Richard, 34, the middle of three adult sons. "To produce 12,000-13,000 prime lambs every year from our land is a high-production system, but because our focus is on long-term sustainability and not harming the farm, we watch our soil fertility and pastures like a hawk and really make sure we look after the country."

De Fegely, widely acclaimed as a leader and innovator in Australia's prime lamb industry, has made big changes on the family farm in the past 30 years to achieve the admired production system he now champions.

A decade ago, he axed his traditional Merino sheep flock of 6000 ewes and wethers that was producing both fine wool and crossbred lambs, to concentrate on meat production alone. He also halted grain cropping on Quamby, convinced it was not good in the long term for his soil type and country.

Instead of running commercial fine-wool Merinos, the de Fegelys have swapped to a "composite" breed, developed

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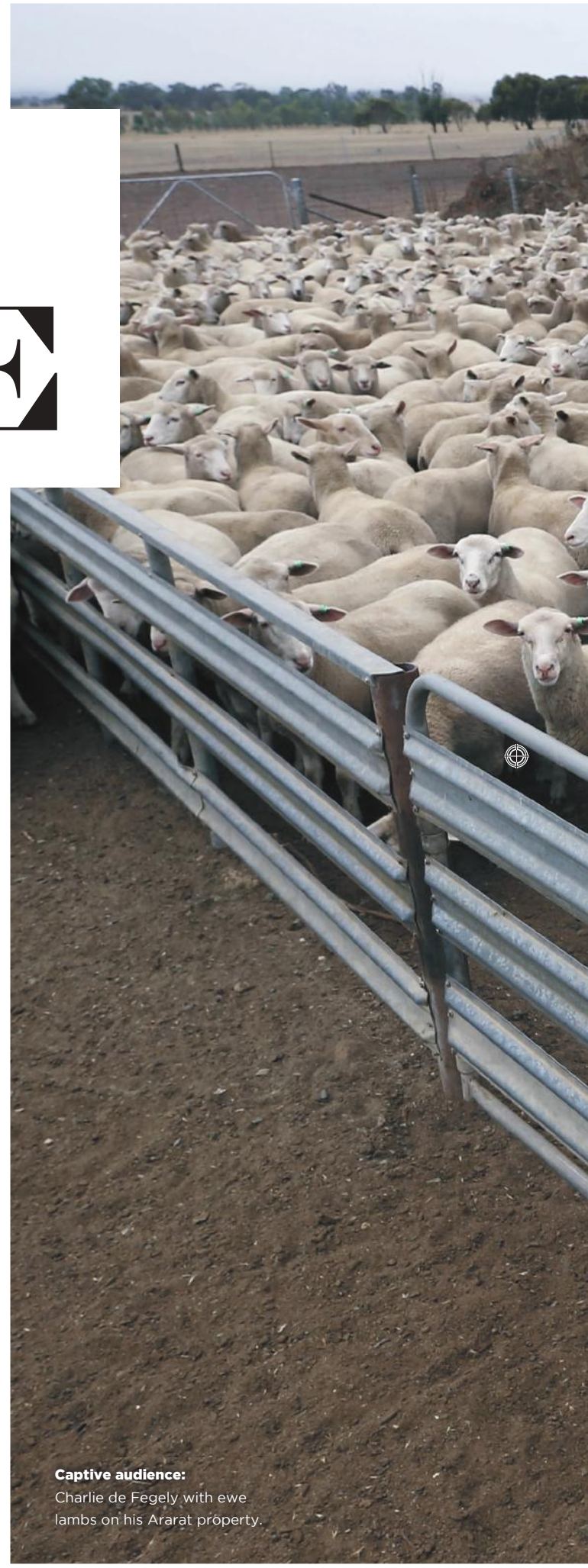

Captive audience: Charlie de Fegely with ewe lambs on his Ararat property.

Cover Story

Hands on: Charlie feeding breeding ewes (right); and with agent Kelvin Doonan (top left). Lizzie de Fegely mustering ewe lambs (middle), and Charlie with son Richard.

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themselves from a mix of the best meat sheep bloodlines, including Australian Whites, Suffolks and Dorset breeds.

The focus of de Fegely's sheep breeding efforts – using carefully selected and evaluated rams based on modern Australian Sheep Breeding Value rankings – is to boost fertility, lamb growth rates, muscle deposits and meat tenderness. In turn, the wool grown has become coarser and lower value, regarded now as a secondary by-product.

"We want to utilise the farm for what it is best at and, because we get winter frosts, this is not cropping country," explains de Fegely. "It is best for pastures and running animals but, with our dry summers, if we kept our lambs growing on the farm past Christmas the place would be a dust bowl.

"When we switched from Merinos, it was about replacing it with a system that was most suited to this environment, would not harm the farm, would produce a high quality eating lamb that was not just a commodity, and which clearly had as its focus the mindset that we are producing food not fibre."

The shift has wrought an extraordinary change in the way Quamby is farmed – and the results produced.

Every February, the massive breeding flock of 6000 ewes and 3000 ewe lambs, which over summer has enjoyed grazing lightly stocked paddocks, is mated to mainly Poll Dorset rams, bought annually from other farmers to retain genetic diversity and hybrid vigour. About 70-90 days after mating, the flock is checked by an accredited scanner for pregnancy success.

Last year a remarkable 72 per cent of ewes were scanned carrying twins, a consequence of selecting for sheep genetic bloodlines with high twinning and fertility indicators. Any ewe that is not pregnant is immediately sold off Quamby.

"I don't like to say twinning is highly heritable but that, with proper care, it's highly repeatable," de Fegely says. "You have to be born a twin to stay on Quamby."

Sheep are then separated into differently managed mobs according to how many lambs they are carrying. Ewes pregnant with single lambs are moved "across the road" from the main Quamby farm, left to graze larger paddocks with little oversight until July lambing.

In contrast, the twin mothers are broken into special groups of about 70 ewes, kept close to the main farm, and grazed in smaller 10-hectare paddocks so grass and feed quality can be closely monitored during autumn and winter.

The result last year was a flock lambing rate of more than 160 per cent, combined with impressively low lamb and birthing mortality for his ewes. The original Merino flock often achieved only a 55 per cent live lamb rate at weaning.

Twin lamb mortality has been almost eradicated; a controversial issue that de Fegely was at the forefront of publicly raising a decade ago, to the consternation of some in the sheep industry. He has always believed the sight of young lambs lying dead at, or shortly after, birth around paddocks needed to be addressed – since many deaths were avoidable with extra feed and special care for twin mothers – before it became an animal welfare issue.

"I'm a firm believer in the need for a social licence to operate; I understand and accept that view," de Fegely says.

Because de Fegely has always championed pain-free marking operations, such as tail and testicle removal to the highest animal welfare standards, his lambs don't suffer the growth setbacks so common elsewhere.

With abundant clover pasture growth coinciding neatly with July lambing, the composite lambs grow quickly, reaching that astounding 40kg liveweight in just 100 days.

Another benefit for Quamby is that profit margins are higher, because most lambs are sold in October without requiring additional summer grain feeding. Each breeding ewe last year generated $180 of income in terms of lambs sold and wool grown, at a margin cost of about $95 a ewe.

Across the farm, stocking rates and pressure on pasture over summer has been reduced by 30 per cent because so many sheep now leave the farm in spring. This allows de Fegely the flexibility of buying in a mob of weaner cattle in February if carryover paddock feed is adequate and the cattle price is right, to rear over winter and sell after six months as young steers for extra income.

"It's so much more environmentally friendly for the land

because we are not carrying so many stock through summer and autumn," says de Fegely's son, Richard.

There is also no need to mules the lambs as most leave the farm so young. Even the 3000 young female lambs retained – all born twins, of course – to build up breeding flock numbers don't have to be mulesed because, as Lizzie explains, unlike crinkle-skinned Merinos, they are clean faced, have few skin folds and are not prone to summer flystrike. "The lambs we produce now are a much more robust animal; I never liked mulesing," Lizzie says. "We have to think all along that we are producing someone else's meat or food. People want to know where their food comes from and how it is produced, so the whole focus now is on meat quality and sustainability."

Integral to the de Fegelys' flourishing prime lamb enterprise is the role played by Kelvin Doonan, a local Ararat stock agent who works throughout the year with Charlie and Richard as a de factor sheep advisor and stock specialist. Lizzie jokes that Charlie wouldn't dare sneeze without first asking for Kelvin's advice and opinion; a compliment Doonan is happy to return.

"Charlie is so progressive and open-minded; once the decision was made to forget Merinos and go down the track to a full composite prime lamb flock, it was full steam ahead,

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sourcing the best genetics and not leaving a stone unturned in their quest to be the best at what they do," recalls Doonan, while selecting and drafting off young ewe lambs in the Quamby yards ready for mating.

"It may be low-input farming, but it's intense in terms of the scale of the sheep numbers and the stocking rates they are running over spring and lambs born; it's all about having the maximum number of stock when the grass is growing and taking the pressure off when it's not.

"And it's working well; the quality is so high they are getting the same price for store lambs that others are getting for finished lambs – about $160 each – and they are looking after their country, pasture and animals at the same time."

De Fegely says it is impossible to talk about the success of his prime lamb business without discussing his passion for pastures. It's a near-obsession that started 35 years ago, which de Fegely, when just a young farmer, take the lead in early grasslands extension work to improve native pastures and double farm carrying capacity from its low average of seven dry sheep equivalents (DSE) per hectare. From 1985 to 1990 he

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Family ties: Charlie and Lizzie with July-born ewe lambs.

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resowed nearly 80 per cent of Quamby with highly productive pasture species – in particular, trikkala sub clover. It made sub clover the "driver" of his farming system, enabling the farm to achieve district-best stocking rates of 15DSEs/ha and high lamb growth rates; a productivity the de Fegelys have been able to maintain while many other sheep properties have slipped backwards. The original clover still provides more than half of his spring pasture feed today.

"But it's not about putting on more super (phosphate fertilisers) because we are a low-cost and input system; it's all about managing your pastures properly," says de Fegely. "We are still grazing some paddocks that were sown with clover 30 years ago that haven't had a tractor on them for 10 years; our organic matter content is above 4 per cent and the soil fertility and pasture growth that comes with that is extraordinary." As a trailblazer in pasture care, more than 6000 farmers have visited Quamby and its high-production lamb system in recent years.

Another accolade came last year, when de Fegely was awarded the prestigious AW Howard medal for making a significant contribution to the advancement of pastures in Australian agriculture. It was the first time the honour, usually reserved for research scientists, was given to a farmer.

De Fegely's pasture productivity secrets are threefold. He rotationally grazes smaller paddocks to allow for shorter intense grazing periods by smaller sheep mobs, and then longer spelling of pastures to give time for regeneration, seed set and clover to persist. All pastures are renovated every decade with light resowing, some perennial grasses like phalaris and ryegrass are "topped up" and fertilisers only used strategically according to soil type and soil fertility testing.

De Fegely says it's ironic that as the impact of climate change comes to the fore and more farmers worry about their carbon footprint and sustainability, red meat production is now being globally smeared as incompatible with environmental consciousness. "As we face climate change, we have to be aware of our carbon footprint, but I think pastures are going to play a big part in managing the future," de Fegely said on accepting the award.

"Animals producing meat, run sustainably on sustainable pastures, are the answer not the problem to climate change, and pasture-based systems are as profitable as any other investment."

Similarly, he questions an emerging view that the future of all agriculture only lies with "regenerative farming". His issue is not with regeneration and caring for country in itself – that's what drives de Fegely too – but that too often the term has come to mean low- or minimal-production agriculture.

He says it doesn't have to be that way, and can't be if food supply is to be maintained. "I don't call myself a regenerative farmer but I suppose that is what I do; managing my pastures, my soils and my animals for long-term sustainability and welfare with low inputs, but I'm also getting high lamb production for the few months of the year that support it here," de Fegely says. "I would challenge people who say livestock farming is bad to find a more sustainable system that's good for the environment and food production long term, than a prime lamb production system like ours."

Richard Rains, former major meat exporter and now chair of the Zanda McDonald Award supporting bright young agricultural professionals in Australia and New Zealand, has nothing but admiration for Charlie de Fegely, who has become his close friend over the past seven years of jointly judging the annual prize.

He regards de Fegely as one of Australia's leading lights in the meat industry, always looking to innovate on his farm, ready to mentor and help others and always deeply aware of broader societal trends that could have an impact on his business and the wider agricultural community.

"He's equally impressive off the farm, in his local community, as he is on the farm; I have the greatest regard for what he is doing because Charlie is an outstanding agriculturalist, a real leader in his field, a smart farmer and a great thinker," Rains says. "He is always looking at what new thing or system might give him the best returns, but will also look after his country; I would call him a grass grower before a lamb farmer who puts the state of his land and his pastures first, which unfortunately is not the norm in Australian agriculture yet today."

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