

EBV Workshop Roundup

By Kathy Peebles, Livestock Development Manager, QMS

We've reached that time of year once again when the bulk of tups are out working and I thought it would be worthwhile to give a round up of the Estimated Breeding Value Workshops held under the banner of the QMS Scottish Sheep Strategy in-conjunction with Signet. The EBV events also had the support of the Scottish Region of the NSA and the Institute of Auctioneers and Appraisers Scotland.

During the past two years workshops have been held throughout Scotland, from Orkney to the Borders. More than 300 Scottish flock masters have taken advantage of the opportunity to gain a better understanding of how the figures can help them to alter specific genetic traits within their own flocks and in time improve business profitability.

The workshops are deliberately practical and start with participants placing four tups by eye, as they would do if they were purchasing these animals to take into their own flock. A member of the Signet team then explains how the EBVs are compiled.

At lambing time Pedigree Breeders record the sex and date of birth of the lamb which is then tied back in with the mother and who she was mated too. At eight weeks the weight of the lamb is recorded and sent to Signet. Gimmer weights pre-tupping are also recorded and sent to Signet. QMS provides funding to subsidise the top 10% of a breed to undergo CT Scanning, this gives a more precise evaluation of "meat to bone ratio and percentage meat yield."

At the most recent workshop Alison Glasgow, the Signet Breeding Specialist, demonstrated to the group how the back fat scanning is done on the participating farm, and spoke about the benefits of being able to manipulate the various traits to help give an increase in milkier ewe lamb replacements, weight, meat or even a quicker finishing period so that the lambs can hit the market at an earlier period when prices have been historically higher. Rod McKenzie, the Scottish Sheep Strategy Development Manager, gave some additional insight into the future role of the Scottish Sheep Strategy and explained to farmers how the simplest of recording systems could help to identify those animals that do not perform as they should and how this can reduce the returns to their business.

At the end of the evening the group returned to the pen of four tups and were asked how they ranked them – in line with all good stock judging this inevitably led to spirited discussion on the various merits of the tups. A member of the Signet team then explained the various EBV traits that the tups exhibited and indicated which animals would be the best performers in different management systems. For example, a ewe lamb replacement strategy, or best for growth, extra muscle etc. Once again much debate ensued and the group could see for themselves that it is not always the showiest of tups that will be best suited for the various commercial systems.

Questions asked at the recent workshops:

Q: I don't have time to record all newborn lambs at lambing time. Any suggestions?

A: Select a representative nucleus flock and record the offspring from these.

Q: How do I know if the recorded tup I purchased is achieving what I thought he would?

A: Check the measurable traits against previous years e.g. eight week weight, scan wt, or deadweight lines. If a recorded tup was bought for his maternal traits improvement can only be expected and measured when his daughters start producing their own lambs. Weight of lamb sold per ewe can be a good indicator especially with hill flocks.

Q: I don't want to be bothered recording, how will this be of benefit to me?

A: EBVs for sheep have been around a lot longer than those for cattle. Most pedigree bull buyers will use the figures as part of their buying decision. As with cattle you can purchase a recorded tup and use him to bring the genetics into a small proportion of the flock. Any offspring retained will then have those characteristics. Trial work has also shown that up to £3 per head extra can be made by getting finished lambs to market just that little bit quicker.

Q: How do I know I can rely on the figures and that they haven't been made up?

A: Signet pen cards displaying the Signet warranted figures will be displayed at the main tup sales. These figures are mathematically extrapolated so that any animal outwith specific bandings will already have been checked by Signet personnel. These figures rule out any influence that feeding prior to the sales may have on the condition of the animal.

Q: Will the EBVs shown for a tup today remain static?

A: As a specific bloodline is used between flocks this does have an influence on the ranking of that tup and the index is amended each year after the off springs have been recorded.

Q: Why are there two different indexes for Terminal Sire Breeds and Hill Breeds?

A: The Hill 2 Index was developed in response to the hill breeds' requirement for better maternal characteristics, whereas the terminal sire breeds are concentrating on producing a finished lamb for the food chain.

Q: How easy is it to get a tup that has both a high EBV for eight week weight and scan weights with a low mature size?

A: Generally the two are opposites and very rarely occur. The Americans call the type of animal that displays positives for both of these traits "curve benders" and they are much sought after animals.

Q: What other EBVs are we likely to see in the near future?

A: In New Zealand they have 94 individual EBVs to choose from, approximately half of which are for wool traits. Here in the UK work is already underway looking at lambing ease, lamb vigour, worm resistance and lameness with others in the pipeline.

Q: Where can I purchase a recorded tup?

A: Breed Society and mainstream sales. Also directly from breeders who record - check out the Signet website for these (and the soon to be launched Scottish Sheep Strategy website).

It was interesting to get some feedback from the Breeders selling at the recent Kelso Tup Sales. This year more Commercial Buyers were asking Breeders if the tup they were interested in was recorded. We also heard that an increasing number of the auctioneers helping their clients to sell stock not just by highlighting the back end a tup had or by its looks but also by flagging the Index for the animal in the ring. Results prepared by Signet from the Kelso sale showed that the recorded flock average for Suffolks was £598.68 compared with the breed average of £430.67, and for Texels the recorded flocks averaged £503.36 and the overall breed average was £469.01.

Kelso is a heartland for the commercial buyer, and these figures show that similar to buying pedigree Bulls at sales, the commercial buyer is looking for animals that they are able to "look under the bonnet" of and evaluate how they will perform with their flock.

EBVs for sheep have been available for a lot longer than for cattle, but till now uptake has been restricted to a select few with the majority citing a lack of understanding on their practical usage by the commercial sheep farmer.

What the workshops have achieved is to give commercial buyers the chance to see for themselves the potential benefits of EBV usage and to give them the confidence to have a go with their own flocks. It could provide that all important edge in the post CAP reform era.