

## Calm Merino ewes adapt to a novel feeding device with less shy feeders than peers of nervous temperament

### **Abstract**

A major challenge for sheep producers in Western Australia is to overcome losses in production efficiency, especially those factors that impact on the production of well-grown Merino ewes for breeding. Confinement feeding can be a low cost, low labour strategy to keep Merino weaners growing during the annual autumn-feed-gap, but there can be some production issues when feeding weaners in confinement. The novelty of a confinement situation along with a novel feeding system may contribute to large variations in weight gain amongst a flock of Merino weaners fed in confinement. It has been demonstrated that temperament is a good indicator of the ability of a sheep to adapt to a novel situation. In this experiment, 24% of 180 ewe weaners of calm temperament were shy feeders after being fed Lupins through lick feeders for 4 weeks in a novel confinement environment. By contrast in the same situation, 41% of their flock mates with a nervous temperament became shy feeders. The average weight gain of the two temperament groups at the end of 4 weeks in confinement were significantly different ( $P < 0.05$ ) with the calm ewes gaining  $4.4 \pm 1.1$  kg and the nervous ewes only  $2.6 \pm 0.92$  kg. The heavy, calm ewe weaners performed best with only 12% of these that were above 31.0 kg at the initial weighing being classified as shy feeders at the end of the experiment. The results from this experiment indicate that selecting well-grown Merino ewe weaners of calm temperament and excluding light weight, nervous weaners from the breeding flock should lead to improvements in production efficiency.

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