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Producers have a positive attitude to behavioural change but are greatly influenced by enterprise factors and perceptions of control

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SUMMARY

Current lamb mortality rates pose serious productivity risks to Australian sheep producers already under threat from declining terms of trade and increased production costs (Productivity Commission, 2005). Practices such as the provision of shelter, focus-feeding, shearing prior to lambing and selection of ewes for calm temperament can reduce lamb mortality by up to 50% (Nowak and Poindron 2006). However, although producer knowledge of these practices and of various extension programs appears widespread, adoption tends to be limited (Logan 2005), suggesting that there is a need to identify factors influencing adoption.

Four focus groups were carried out with Western Australian sheep producers (n = 29) to investigate their beliefs and attitudes about lamb mortality and strategies to improve lamb survival rates. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) was used to guide the discussions and to code the data. The data were also coded for emergent themes.

Several key themes emerged from the focus group data. Producers had a positive attitude to change in response to lamb mortality. All of the producers thought that they could increase their productivity by improving lamb survival rates and were interested in potential solutions. However, although producers had a positive attitude to change, there was great variation in attitudes to individual strategies because of enterprise factors and perceptions of control.

Enterprise factors, such as goals and management structure, appeared to play an important role in decision-making. First, variation in attitudes to individual strategies tended to relate to how well the practice matched the goals of the primary enterprise. For example, 7 of the 18 superfine wool breeders implemented different strategies with their stud and commercial flocks. Second, enterprise factors may moderate the influence of attitudes on decision-making. For example, while it was widely agreed that it was vital to minimise disturbance and handling of sheep during lambing to reduce mortality, one producer felt that the demands of his enterprise required that he interact with the lambing flock to collect pedigree information.

Perceptions of control also appeared to play an important role in decision-making. Twelve producers stated that other aspects of the farming system, such as time constraints and labour and resource availability, prevented them from putting a particular practice in place.

In conclusion, sheep producers have a positive attitude to change in response to a perceived problem but have varying attitudes towards specific methods of addressing this problem. Additionally, enterprise factors and perceptions of control seem to play key roles in decision-making. A survey has been developed to confirm and quantify these relationships.

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