

## ROMNEY SHINING LIGHT



Ross Humphrey of Brookfield Romney, Manawatu, with his \$9000 ram, which was sporidesmin tested to a high level.

### **FE tolerance trait boosting prices**

Farmers wanting some insurance against facial eczema can now buy rams from a group focussing on FE tolerance.

As evidenced by the large number of ram sale adverts running at the moment, this is the time of year farmers are weighing up their options surrounding ram purchasing. Many stay loyal to the studs that they've been associated with over the years, confident the traits they're offering are the most compatible to the direction their breeding programme is going.

Others look around each year for rams that may offer something to enhance what they're doing. They may have identified a deficiency in their flock, or just want to accentuate a particular trait. In the North Island especially, the prevalence of FE means that whatever the selection criteria used, it is vitally important to seek FE tolerance as a trait, otherwise they'll experience limitations to their sheep production and performance.

Sub-clinical FE, the damage done by spores of the fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, lowers the general immunity of sheep and cattle, creating lower growth rates and fertility. A group of ram breeders dedicated to minimising the negative effects FE has on productivity has come together under the name FE Gold to clearly define tolerance and how it is tested and marketed to ram buyers.

It identifies those breeders who are producing the top FE genetics and are testing at the highest level. In other words, those breeders that have been testing for a minimum of 10 years, and dosing at a level of 0.6mg/kg dose of sporidesmins. In years past, ram buyers didn't have access to high tested rams in order to lift their flock's tolerance. Today, they can introduce rams from studs testing at .6, and a flock can make rapid gains due to the high factor of inheritability.

PGG Wrightson's national stud stock auctioneer, Bruce Orr, is full of admiration and enthusiasm for the FE Gold group's initiative. "There's been a lot of hard work; expense and sacrifice to some good sheep over the years to get a pool of genes capable of mitigating this cruel disease."

Orr believes commercial and stud farmers are already recognising the benefits of the work done by FE Gold breeders with a couple of early sales fetching vastly improved prices for their rams. "The fact that this is a non-breed specific group shows that this is not just a marketing ploy but a genuine push to alleviate what has become our biggest constraint to effective sheep farming."

Top price at last week's Mid-Northern Romney sale at Claudelands, Hamilton was \$9000 for a John Reeves Waimai ram that showed great all-round attributes, but was also sporidesmin tested to a high level. This ram is a combination of 27 years of facial eczema testing by Reeves, with over 900 rams tested over this period.

Purchaser Ross Humphrey of Brookfield Romney, Manawatu, has seen a growing number of his clientele demanding FE tolerant sheep and while he knows that his stud displays this trait, he now needs to have the scientific data to back that up. The future testing of this ram's progeny will further grow his own business.

Article John Watson

Photo: Graham Brown