

Lamb Supply Chain Group: a conduit for collaboration, co-investment and innovation

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The Lamb Supply Chain Group (LSCG) has laid a foundational legacy in meat science innovation within the Australian lamb industry, operating as a conduit for collaboration, co-investment and human capacity building. It was originally formed to facilitate information flow between producers, processors, retailers, researchers, governments and consumers, and succeeded by building strong partnerships along the value chain and embedding research innovation. The LSCG took on the goal of the Sheep Industry Strategic Plan (2010-15) to increase lean meat yield by 0.1% per annum, while maintaining eating quality. The LSCG has itself been a collaboration between the Sheep CRC (2007–2019), Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), Australian Meat Processor Corporation (AMPC), Advanced Livestock Measurement Technologies project (ALMTech, 2015–22), State DPI's and industry Supply Chains.

A crucial step in the engagement of supply chains was to establish the business case around enhancing lean meat yield and eating quality. The Lamb Value Calculator was developed to facilitate an economic analysis of each business, establishing the potential financial returns. Within collaborating supply chains, the team then supported the development and adoption of lean meat yield (LMY) prediction methods and eating quality, the development of producer feedback & lastly, supplier training for lamb and yearling sheep meat using a series of specially tailored educational packages. Examples of this include supporting the development and utilisation of Meat Standards Australia (MSA), the Lean Meat Yield Technical Guide, the Lamb Value Calculator, 20 national lean meat yield and eating quality demonstration sites, and the MLA Profitable Grazing Systems Supported Learning Program in LMY and EQ. Most initiatives focused on developing a clearer and objective carcass specification which created “market-pull” of on-farm best-practice and technology adoption.

Critical to this success has been the development of relationships with lamb supply chains via a structured single-entry point, scoping discussions, meetings and workshops to establish areas of mutual interest. Shared goals were established and in some cases a co-funded Supply Chain Officer (SCO) was appointed to develop and deliver agreed measurable actions and manage the collaborative engagement. Six Supply Chain Officers were supported / developed during 2007–2019 with WAMMCO, JBS Australia, AMPC, Thomas Foods International, Australian Lamb Company and Gundagai Meat Processors. It was essential for the SCOs to have clear line of sight, and reporting to the CEO / COO, host regular technical and project management meetings, make applications for specific RD&A projects, develop and implement strong communication skills, both internally and externally to producers and industry in general. Many of these SCOs are now being made permanent staff, with new collaborative goals. This is the ultimate indicator of success of the program.

Human-capacity building formed a part of the larger effort of the LSCG, and was delivered in a number of ways. Firstly, the LSCG had over 100 members and 45 guests participating in regular review, planning and research update meetings. The LSCG mentored numerous graduates from the Sheep CRC and collaborating organisations, and members were invited speakers at key industry events and forums such as LambEx, and “It’s Ewetime” forums. Lastly, team-members contributed papers and posters to national and international science associations.

Critical success factors for the outcomes, and of the operation, function and ongoing longevity of the LSCG include the shared development of its own operational ground rules that were maintained by members, and upheld by the Executive. Other factors include working as a team, consistency in the National Coordinator and Executive who were also Program Managers and leaders of the Sheep CRC, regular 2 day meetings with tours of innovations and developments. Also, the LSCG Scorecard was developed to measure the health and wellbeing of the LSCG, and to checkoff on group KPI's. Members were asked to rate the LSCG out of 10, and provide comments on successes, and suggestions to work through constraints. The Scorecard ranged from 7.6/10 for poor meetings and frustrating periods, up to 8.4/10 for stronger and more positive periods.

The LSCG has developed a culture of scoping ideas, offering peer review, and developing nation-wide collaborative projects. The LSCG was pivotal in developing and securing two Rural Research & Development for Profit (RRD4P) grants (\$10M+) for carcass value RD&A. The LSCG has recently morphed into the broader Supply Chain Group which now includes beef and continues a core focus on the research development and extension / adoption of meat science of lean meat yield, eating quality and health attributes, objective carcass measurement, genetics, and producer feedback systems.