

## Sheep genetics with a difference move from Ulster to New Zealand

**Almost 250 years after the first sheep arrived in New Zealand an Ulster man is providing revolutionary new genetics to the largest private ram breeding operation in the country.**

Dr Steven Johnston is one of the breeders exporting modern British sheep genetics to NZ. He has been breeding and performance recording EasyCare™ sheep just outside Ballymena, Co Antrim for 14 years. This breed requires minimal shepherding and veterinary care, **sheds its fleece in the summer so does not need shearing**, yet offers excellent meat yields and lambing ratios. The fleece is kempy, leaving a dense hair covered in lanolin.



Steven has focussed on producing clean hair type sheep within his breeding programme and it was this that initially caught the eye of Pierre Syben from the Wairere breeding operation near Masterton on North Island. Interestingly Dr Johnston had visited the Wairere ram breeding operation at Masterton back in early 2005, being shown around by Derek Daniell, Business Principal, but never thinking he would be selling them sheep genetics in the future. Steven, along with two Scottish breeders, and with the help of an Aussie vet has provided the genetics behind 200 pure and 500 first cross EasyCare™ lambs born at Masterton in August of this year, 2022, with more planned for the coming years.

So why the move to hair sheep? Pierre comments that "Like the UK, New Zealand is challenged by the rising cost and declining availability of labour. The sheep I saw on Steven's Northern Ireland farm fitted our ethos of creating a sustainable, lower input sheep production system. Having 14 years of performance data behind Steven's sheep to back up what I had seen was also very important as no industry can afford to take a step backwards."

There is currently a strong interest in hair type sheep from Wairere clients and the first sale offering Ulster genetics to the wider New Zealand sheep industry is planned for March 2023. In recent years the Wairere animal genetics operation has expanded into Australia and the UK. As Steven comments "I wish Wairere all the best in this new and exciting venture, the sheep business, like any other, must be innovative as we adapt to the changing world around us and it is great to get the opportunity to play a small part in that change."



**EasyCare™ sheep genetics from farms in Ulster and Scotland are set to play a role in reducing costs on NZ farms. These sheep lose their wool so do not bear the cost of clipping at a time of low wool prices and a labour shortage.**