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# BUILDING A FINE-WOOL FUTURE AT MOUNT BENGER

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**TONY AND JENNA STEVENS** are passionate about farming fine-wool sheep on their hill country farm, Mount Benger in Central Otago. The decision to transition to a quarterbred flock means that Tony and Jenna now have greater price stability, and a shift to higher-performing genetics gives them the opportunity to improve their wool and lamb production.

Since buying Mount Benger five years ago, the couple have successfully transitioned the original Perendale flock finer, first to halfbreds and now to quarterbreds. Their ten-year plan is to grow the flock from 3,400 to 4,000 quarterbred ewes, producing highly marketable 21 micron fibre and weaning around 130 percent.

## POWERFUL GENETICS

Trial work undertaken with the assistance of The New Zealand Merino Company (NZM)<sup>1</sup> has given Tony and Jenna an insight into the production gains that can be achieved by using different genetics. Alongside the progeny from the current Mount Benger rams, the Tony and Jenna compared progeny from two external sires.

A range of measurements were taken, including liveweights and wool data at shearing. What stood out at Mount

Benger was the difference in fleece weights, with the progeny from one of the external sires averaging half a kilogram more than the progeny from the current Mount Benger rams.

Alongside this raw data, Tony and Jenna are also interested in using estimated breeding values (EBVs) to assist with their ram-buying decisions. Topping the list at the moment is fleece weight, to take advantage of contract opportunities with NZM. Tony and Jenna value the stability of the contract pricing in the wool side of their business.

They are also keen to use the fat and muscle EBVs to improve lamb survival and growth rates. Mount Benger is a store lamb property, and while the volatility of store lamb prices is one of the factors behind the couple's shift to finer-wool sheep, better genetic fat and muscle will increase the number of

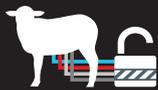


Jenna and Tony Stevens from Mount Benger in Central Otago

lambs they produce and put them in a better position in the competitive store lamb market.

## REALISING THE POTENTIAL

Tony and Jenna know that having the right genetics at Mount Benger is only



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one half of the equation, and are making big gains in realising the potential of their sheep with good nutrition throughout the year.

Of the 1,900 hectares at Mount Benger, 400 hectares are cultivable and the rest is high hill country, reaching up to 1,300 metres above sea level. The steep country and altitude bring their challenges, but Tony and Jenna have a long-term development plan in place, using different species to lift performance across the whole farm. They are focused on increasing the

amount and quality of feed, so that they can increase stock numbers, and grow out young stock well.

There is a mix of crops and pasture on the improved country (including lucerne, oats, ryecorn, kale, swedes, red and white clovers, plantain and cocksfoot). Tony and Jenna are finding particular success with oats and ryecorn, followed by lucerne mixes, which have tolerated the dry conditions well over the past two seasons. Tony says that the sheep on the lucerne look “like they’re on a different planet

to the ones on the original paddocks, so it’s a no-brainer, we’ve got to keep going.” They are also renewing older areas of lucerne and pasture, along with cultivating scrub country.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Tony and Jenna love bringing up their young family - Mack (7), Tommy (6) and Matilda (3) - at Mount Benger. Building a future for the next generation, and having fun doing it, is the big-picture goal for Tony and Jenna, and they see highly productive fine-wool sheep taking a lead role in that future.



## MOUNT BENDER – ROXBURGH, CENTRAL OTAGO

- **SIZE:** 1,900 hectares (400 hectares cultivated).
- **STOCK NUMBERS:** Currently wintering 3,400 ewes and 70 cows. Aiming to lift stock numbers to 4,000 ewes and 100 cows.
- **BREED CHANGE:** Have shifted finer from the original Perendale flock, first to a halfbred (28 micron average), and now to a quarterbred flock. Currently at 23 micron, and aiming to stabilise around 21 micron.
- **SCOPE:** An additional 430 hectares of developed land (both dryland and irrigated), is currently leased out to help with cash flow.
- **FIT-FOR-MARKET:** Through The New Zealand Merino Company, Mount Benger contracts their wool to Smartwool, giving them a strong connection to the market and the ability to budget with confidence.

<sup>1</sup> An artificial insemination programme at Mount Benger was supported by the New Zealand Sheep Industry Transformation Project (NZSTX), a Primary Growth Partnership programme between The New Zealand Merino Company and the Ministry for Primary Industries.

For advice on maximising your returns from high-performance fine-wool sheep contact the NZM Production Science team, we would love to hear from you.

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