

Dorpers and White Dorpers Suit Prime Lamb Production in Australia

By Trisha Esson.

Dorper and White Dorper sheep are suited to farming in Australia and are valued for their ability to adapt and thrive in a variety of climatic and grazing conditions. Introduced from South Africa in the mid 1990's, enterprising breeders saw the advantage these sheep would offer with farmers faced with more frequent and prolonged drought, increasing labour shortages and operating costs. Using Dorper sheep as the basis for your prime lamb enterprise means that these factors impact less heavily on your business. Being shedding sheep, the Dorpers can handle the Australian summer better than conventional breeds and are unlikely to suffer from heat stress. You will often see the Dorper grazing throughout a 45° C day whilst 1st cross ewes stick to the shade. Dorpers require minimal management for internal parasites in a dry environment and produce a lamb with a lean and meaty carcass. For these reasons they are fast becoming the backbone of the organic lamb industry in Australia.



14 week old ewe lambs raised in drought conditions with **no** supplementary feeding.



Dorper ewe with her lambs in drought conditions. These animals received **no** supplementary feeding.

The word Dorper is often used to describe both the Dorper (black head) and White Dorper (white head) sheep. There are many similarities between the two breeds of sheep. Both the Dorper and White Dorper are wool shedding meat sheep. The adult sheep is typically a medium sized sheep with a long, deep body exhibiting exceptional body and rump muscling. They are non seasonal breeders thus providing the opportunity for prime lamb production all year round. The lambs are not big in comparison with many other sheep breeds so the ewes lambs with ease. These small lambs are vigorous and once born grow and develop quickly. Dorper and White Dorper lambs mature early. Prime lambs are able to be turned off quickly, with minimal inputs, thus returning to the producer maximum return on his investment.



12 month old Dorper ewe with new born lamb.



17 week old (weaned) Dorper twin ram lambs.

Dorper s and White Dorpers will lose most of their fleece during the warmer months of the year, some shed completely whilst others retain some wool cover on their backs. All Dorpers and White Dorpers should have a wool less belly, breach and neck line, eliminating the need for flystrike control practices that include shearing, mulesing, crutching or chemical control. This results in immediate dollar savings, reduced labour costs and infrastructure requirements. It also reduces costs by decreasing the number of times mobs need to be mustered and handled.

Initially Dorpers were run in the lower rainfall areas of South Australian and NSW but gradually an increasing number of them being used in conventional prime lamb enterprises. In the feedlot situation the Dorper has an excellent feed conversion ratio of 4 kg of feed to 1 kg of growth, a 20-40 % increase in feed conversion when compared to other crossbreeds. With increasing global demand for grains influencing higher grain prices this is clearly a major production advantage. This coupled with the fact that Dorpers are non selective grazers, has enabled more Dorpers than conventional breeds to be run on the same amount of land as they are able to utilise a wider variety of feed resources. This may also assist in better and more sustainable pasture management.

Generally rams are used as maternal sires for the development of shedding flocks but are becoming popular as terminal sires where the heavy muscling, higher dress weight percentages and excellent lean meat yields are appreciated. The greater amount of Dorper or White Dorper infusion in a crossbreed the greater the recoverable meat percentage. F1 prime lambs typically yield between 41-43 %, F2 and F3 to 47 %, fullbloods to 51%. VIAscan imaging of Dorpers has shown 57.5 % lean meat yields with a 15.9 % loin meat and 17.4 % shoulder meat yields for carcasses of medium weight 22-24 kg. An increase in lean meat yield of this percentage can give an extra 770 g of meat compared to a carcass of the same weight with a lower meat yield of 12. 2 %. This makes a big difference to the profitability of the carcass.



Pictured above Dorper lamb carcasses in the chill room, courtesy of Spear Creek Dorper Lamb.

Dorper and White Dorper ewes make exceptional mothers and are highly protective of their lambs resulting in high weaning rates. Ewes maintain condition well and usually will rejoin with lambs still at foot. In areas with good feed availability all year round, producers tend to keep ewes working to ensure they don't get too fat whilst gaining the benefits of three lambing intervals in 2 years.



12 month old Dorper ewes with lambs at foot in a mixed grazing situation.

Compared to other prime lamb sheep breeds, Dorpers are often shorter but heavier, so it is often incorrectly assumed that they are a lighter weight sheep. Unfortunately this can be a disadvantage when selling in the saleyard if buyers are not familiar with the breed. Selling over the hooks removes these errors in estimation of body weight and therefore generally increases returns to the producer.

The Dorper has several advantages over other shedding sheep options. Unlike the Wiltipoll and Whiltshire Horn sheep, the Dorper is a non seasonal breeder and is early maturing with faster growth rates. Ewe lambs usually reach 50 kg at around 6-7 months and may be joined for a first lamb at 1 year of age making this sheep a more productive alternative and facilitating more efficient use of feed resources. Ram lambs at 7 months have been used successfully at joining rate of 2 % in some flocks. It is typical for most rams to start a working life between 8- 12 months of age. Compared to the Damara, the Dorper offers a much more saleable carcass with greater muscling and more even fat distribution.

Lamb production ventures based on the Dorper are able to be employed in a variety of farming enterprises. Due to the minimal labour inputs required to turn off prime lamb, it is possible to do so on properties with limited infrastructure available. The Dorper and White Dorper's adaptability has enabled them to be successfully integrated into a wide variety of Australian farming enterprises. They have found favour with a range of farmers, from the small or lifestyle farmer to the pastoralist with thousands of hectares. This wide variety of prime lamb producers are primarily attracted to Dorpers and White Dorpers because they are a fertile, low maintenance, hardy and easy care sheep, requiring fewer inputs for a good return.

A national organisation; the Australian Dorper and White Dorper Association Inc., offers support to all Dorper and White Dorper Sheep breeders, be they stud or commercial. Members of the Association are provided with up to date information, guidance and education, through field days, newsletters, workshops, member networks and its website.

Dorpers offer a farming option that is economically viable, environmentally sustainable and employs ethical farming practices.