Tracking livestock performance is shaping the sector

Welcome to the latest issue of Weighside.
In this edition we hear from a cross-section of people in the agribusiness sector about their views on using animal data for benchmarking, productivity and planning.

Electronic ID tags and readers allow farmers and others across the agribusiness sector to tap into a mass of rich data for every animal they rear, treat, fund or process; past and present.
We’ve gathered thoughts from farmers, representatives of the rural finance, educational, feed and animal health sectors and the supply chain.
We then consider some more indepth commentary from Anyika Thomsen, Hawkes’ Bay vet, Siwan Shaw, Business Manager from Atihau Whanganui Incorporation, and Lincoln University researcher and academic, Andy Greer.
Our latest weighing tool, the new 5000 series weigh scales, helps to tie together the importance of tracking and weighing livestock for optimum animal performance.

Launched this year, the 5000 weigh scale series retains the speed, accuracy and rugged reliability of Tru-Test’s 3000-series with advances in technology and more intuitive design allowing farmers to do more with animal data, faster and more conveniently than ever before.
Everything about the series, from data collection and analysis to distribution, is designed to make work easier, streamlining tasks and giving instant valuable and accurate information on animal performance at the yard and the crush for informed stock management decisions.

www.tru-test.com/livestock

How are you tracking?
Let’s talk.
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The new world of farming

If you are in any doubt that monitoring individual animal performance is at the core of our industry’s future, you may want to take a moment to read these perspectives from people right across our sector. Thank you to all who contributed for your input and for your commitment to best practice.

“Knowing exactly how animals are growing is increasingly important to meeting supply commitments.”

Alan McDermott

“Now we have the tools to more precisely identify the variations, when they occur and by how much.”

Andy Greer

Matt Kerr
Rural Accountant

With advanced EID and weighing technologies and farm accounting software we will soon be able to analyse weight information as we’re analysing financial performance. This means farmers forecasting and budgeting production, and reporting against it, in real time.

Scott Wishart
BNZ Agribusiness

More reliable, timely animal performance information helps us make faster and more accurate lending decisions for our farmers. Weight and performance data can give us real-time performance information. That sort of integration will undoubtedly improve profitability.

Alan McDermott
ANZCO

Knowing exactly how animals are growing is increasingly important to meeting supply commitments, optimising and aligning livestock supply and specifications with customer demand for the best outcomes for the entire value chain.

Andrew Greer
Lincoln University

Individual performance recording with the help of RFID and weighing platforms will be the biggest single productivity gain in sheep, beef and deer farming since ‘scanning’.

Collier Isaacs
FarmIQ

Farmers tend to adopt anything that makes life more productive and profitable. That’s the #1 reality for anyone involved in the development of weighing and measuring technology.
Marcus Edge  
Raho Ruru Romneys

We now use one less labour unit at weaning and it takes half the time. And when it comes to ram selling you just need to wave the wand over a particular ram and all its data appears immediately on the XR5000’s screen for the customer.

Dave McKenzie  
Mt Montrose stud breeder

Meeting target weights is one of the key drivers of the business. We put a great emphasis on mating weights and good weaning weights.

Siwan Shaw  
Atihau Whanganui Inc

Increasingly intensive weighing on our six breeding properties means weight gains are known immediately the stock are first weighed on the finishing properties. It’s also helping us really understand the best summer cropping mix for maximum lamb performance.

Anyika Thomsen  
Veterinarian

Tracking animal weights helps us keep an eye on the welfare of the animals by picking those that are underperforming. Knowing the individual animals with exceptional growth and reproductive traits also gives us huge gains in future performance.

Matthew Crampton  
Agronomist

One of the first questions I ask many farmers is about weight gain, because this tells us if the crop is working for them to achieve their goals.

Collier Isaacs

“Makes life more productive and profitable.”

Matt Kerr

“We will soon be able to analyse weight information as we’re analysing financial performance.”

Marcus Edge

“We now use one less labour unit at weaning.”

Anyika Thomson

“Tracking animal weights helps us keep an eye on the welfare of the animals.”

Siwan Shaw

“Close monitoring of our livestock helps us understand the differences between farms.”
One of the main differences between the best farmers and the rest is how quickly they anticipate and respond to changes in animal performance. Visual clues aren’t always enough. To be quick off the mark often takes current and historical animal weight data at an individual level. This means RFID-based technology.

Being able to detect underperformance of any animal or group of animals as early as possible can be a bit like having a canary in a mineshaft. It gives valuable clues to aid management decisions across the herd or flock.

Our practice is increasingly assessing weight-based performance on sheep and beef farms, something that’s been relatively common in dairy for some time. Taking regular weight recordings by animal can provide accurate meaningful data which we can use to assist clients in making animal health and management decisions. Not only does this mean early anticipation of necessary nutritional or health needs, weight-based performance is helping drive major gains by identifying individual animals with exceptional growth and reproductive traits. There’s just as much potential for productivity growth from genetic gain as there is from nutrition!

Tracking animal weights also brings the direct economic benefit of knowing more accurately how much of which health products are needed.

Wastage can be huge on farm. Farmers who monitor animal weights can identify the right time for animal health treatments to be applied and the ultimate impact of those decisions. This can bring a cost saving in product, time and reduced animal stress and is part-and-parcel of good farm and financial management.

The principal barrier to achieving these financial, health and time benefits is the perception of the time and complexity in sifting and interpreting data to understand what’s happening around animal performance. Fortunately this perception is not necessarily a reality.

“Visual clues aren’t always enough.”

Monitoring weight and animal performance is definitely changing the way we farm and do business. We need to know what’s going on, how we are tracking and to be able to make decisions on what and how we are feeding.

Tracking weights and performance is really important for Atihau Whanganui Inc. We need to know exactly what is happening on the farms, to collect the necessary information, evaluate what’s going on and make proactive decisions. Our farms have quite different production and topography from each other. Close monitoring of our livestock helps us understand the differences between farms. Ultimately it’s this sort of precision and real time data that helps us make informed management decisions. It means we can maximise opportunity, commit to supply contracts, improve the running of the farms as a whole as well as maximise profitability.

There’s a lot of accountability and reporting involved with corporate farming. Sole charge farmers don’t have that same board room reporting. However monitoring animal performance is equally useful as we are all looking for the same end result.

The increasing importance of tracking and weighing stock is a benefit to the industry. Dairy farmers can make some daily decisions based on how much milk is in the vat. Sheep and beef farmers can’t make daily decisions unless they are monitoring weight gain because their end product is six months away. Monitoring weight means you can make decisions on what and how you are feeding, on best practice and from that make better gains.

Know what’s going on
RFID-based weighing offers just as much potential for additional value as scanning has through individual animal management versus using mob averages. We know that considerable variation exists between animals within a herd or mob. Now we have the tools to more precisely identify the variations, when they occur and by how much.

It took almost 20 years for scanning to answer the doubters. Now virtually no one questions its value.

At Lincoln we’ve been testing the impacts of RFID technology on our Ashley Dene farm and at the newly-established Sheep Technology Unit. We’ve shown several on-farm benefits of RFID including drench reductions, improved wool weight estimates and the ability to identify the milking efficiency of ewes.

We’ve found that by using targeted selective treatments based on liveweight gain of individual animals drench use can be reduced by 50% with little or no impact on productivity. Replacement animals which are likely to require fewer drenches can then be selected.

Weighing animals before and after shearing provides an estimate of wool weight without the hassle of weighing fleeces. In our trials we used this approach and found when culling the bottom 30% of ewe hoggets we increased the mean fleece weight by 200g. That’s enough to recoup much of the additional cost of an RFID tag.

We are currently investigating using the change in live weight to identify ‘elastic’ ewes; those ewes which more readily convert their tissue reserves for milk production. We are also looking at drafting-for-sale strategies where the slower-growing and less efficient animals are identified before they are sent to slaughter.

The more variables that can be tested with RFID and weighing technologies the better because that way we can gather relevant information about how tracking and weighing influences what happens on farm and how individual farmers can best use the technology to suit their particular needs.

The most important aspect of RFID is the ability for farmers to monitor individual animal performance and react accordingly. That’s where the greatest on-farm gains can be made.

Andrew Greer
Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Life Sciences and Agriculture, Lincoln University

Practice makes perfect
Introducing our 5000 series weigh scales

There is a lot at stake when assessing the growth of individual animals from weaning right through to mating as well as during calving or lambing. Farmers who accurately track target weights can control health, feed and growth of their animals and can reap long term rewards.

To help farmers in this new world of farming, Tru-Test has introduced its new rugged 5000 series weigh scales comprising the ID5000 and XR5000 weigh scale. Each weigh scale records, analyses and stores useful data to monitor and track the progress of individual animals toward their target weights. The weigh scales can also help analyse how animals are faring on different pasture or supplementary feeding systems. Farmers can benchmark their stock against how previous years’ stock have performed and save ‘favourite’ settings so the right information is collected year on year.

Ease of use, massive data storage and instant analysis are standout features of the 5000 series. Farmers can customise settings to track different mobs, young stock, twinning versus singletons and add additional information such as sire/ram, AB details, grazing and feed.

Tru-Test’s 5000 series weigh scales have been designed for modern farming. Both the ID5000 and XR5000 connect wirelessly or by cable for direct data-transfer data from the yard to the office or to any other destination. The new 7” colour transflective screen gives perfect clarity even in the harshest light and uses the sun’s energy for extended battery life. The series is IP67 rated (water and dust proof), compatible with any Tru-Test loadbars and is easily transportable for use at the home farm or the run off.

As always, all Tru-Test weigh scales use Tru-Test’s unique Superdamp III technology to lock onto the weight of a moving animal and remain the fastest, most accurate weigh scales on the market.

Tru-Test’s 5000 Weigh Scale Series – What’s new?

- **Set up – made easy**
  Step-by-step set ups, on-screen help, pre-defined settings, ‘favourites’, automatic recall and back up, ease of use to switch easily between jobs and make changes on the go.

- **Data capture – made easy**
  Take the sweat out of managing data in the yard with powerful tools to benchmark animal data and manage target weights.

- **Data transfer – made easy**
  Transfer with USB to PC, Bluetooth, USB stick and smart phone apps (Apple and Android).

- **Data storage – made easy**
  The XR5000 holds up to one million records, 100 data fields and 1000 sessions. It’s ideal for data hungry farming – breeders, finishers and commercial operations.

- **Visibility – made easy**
  A 7” colour transflective screen for perfect clarity even in the harshest light. An automatic instant inside-outside mode sensor and ability to harness solar energy for extended battery life.
Take a load off this spring.
Get 50% off loadbars when you buy a weigh scale* this busy season.

EziWeigh7 Weigh Scale + MP600 loadbars = $2090 (Save $654)
ID5000 Weigh Scale + MP600 loadbars = $3140 (Save $654)
XR5000 Weigh Scale + MP600 loadbars = $4140 (Save $654)

EziWeigh7 Weigh Scale + HD1010 loadbars = $2590 (Save $1154)
ID5000 Weigh Scale + HD1010 loadbars = $3640 (Save $1154)
XR5000 Weigh Scale + HD1010 loadbars = $4690 (Save $1154)

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Terms and Conditions: Offers and pricing valid from 15 September – 30 November 2014. Pricing is GST inclusive, subject to change and includes delivery to the retail store. Savings amounts are based on Tru Test RRP’s. EziWeigh7 Weigh Scale is excluded from the 50% off loadbars offer.

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