



Here Comes The Future



Dohne Merinos Helping to Improve Wool Quality for Nick Theos Family Ranch

Paul Neilson, DVM, and his wife, Renae, could have left well enough alone. After all, they were just a few years away from handing control of the Nick Theos Family Ranch in Northwest Colorado to their daughter, Kelcee Vroman, and son-in-law, Ryan. But like most parents, they wanted more for the generations to come.

So, they set off on the Dohne Merino project, injecting new bloodlines into a Columbia-based flock that was in serious need of improvement when it came to wool quality. The result has been finer, whiter, longer wool without sacrificing meat quality or quantity.

Developed in 1939 in South Africa, Dohne Merino sheep placed an emphasis on both wool and meat. Their influence has turned the ranch sheep into a true dual-purpose flock.

Wool quality had long been a concern for Paul and Renae, even before they took over ranch operations from Renae's dad, Nick Theos, in 2011.

"We wanted to improve the wool quality and not lose anything on the lamb side," Paul said. "We thought that without increasing the expense of running the ewes, we could increase the wool quality to generate greater revenue without greater expense."

Faansie Basson, a South African sheepdog trainer they met through the annual Meeker Classic Sheepdog Championship Trials, provided the answer they'd been looking for when he introduced them to the Dohne Merino breed.

"It almost seemed to be too good to be true," Renae said.

And it almost was. Disease issues have made it impossible to import sheep embryos from South Africa into the United States, but through patient research, the Neilsons found another avenue. The breed had been imported to Australia, and it was possible to get both embryos and semen from there into the United States.

MacQuarie Dohne Merino Sheep – under the leadership of Dr. Greg McCann and John Nadin – had imported the breed into Australia in the 1990s, and could meet Paul and Renae's needs. McCann traveled to the family ranch in Meeker, Colo., in the fall of 2017 to transfer purchased embryos. Knowing that the use of embryos and semen would be crucial in helping the Neilsons achieve their goals, McCann encouraged Paul (a large animal vet) to learn laparoscopic artificial insemination, which he did.

Lambs were born in February 2018 and they became the basis

of a purebred flock that Paul and Renae are developing as they work with the next generation to establish crossbred ranch sheep that produce quality wool and lamb.

"We were fortunate with our other jobs that we didn't need the ranch to make a living," said Paul, who owns a local veterinary clinic. Renae is the longtime assessor in Rio Blanco County. "Because of that, we were able to pass the ranch on to the next

generation (three daughters: Kelcee Vroman, Morgan Pfeiffer and Taylor Neilson) a lot earlier than some ranchers. A lot of times in my work with ranches, I see that the father dies at 85 or 90 and that's when a 60-year-old makes his first decision. Ryan and Kelcee wanted to be making the decisions. But it's hard to do that without the decisions affecting you, and now the decisions affect them."

As far as sheep are concerned, Paul and Renae's only responsibility is the Dohne purebred flock they are developing. Their main customers to this point have been Ryan and Kelcee, but they aren't complaining.

"We'd like to see the ranch go on and continue to run successfully," Paul said. "And we think these type of sheep will make that possible. The goal wasn't to be a big Dohne Merino breeder in the United States. The goal was to improve the wool quality of the ranch flock. We wouldn't have done this project without that goal. Fortunately, the kids have been receptive to it and seem to like the sheep that we are producing. This year, for the first

time, we'll probably have some extra rams to sell."

In years past, the ranch bought replacement ewes from Tom Kourlis, a longtime producer in the area. But his family ranch



Despite nearing retirement from the ranch, Renae and Paul Neilson wanted to find a way to improve the Columbia-based flock's wool quality. Thanks to friendships made through the Meeker Classic Sheepdog Championship Trials, the couple were able to introduce Dohne sheep bloodlines from Australia into their breeding program.



With the family ranch turned over to their daughter and son-in-law, the Neilsons set about developing a purebred Dohne Merino flock that could be used for crossbreeding with the ranch flock.

sold out a couple of years back. So, it was a good time for the Nick Theos Family Ranch to start raising its own replacement ewes.

"We like the idea of raising our own, and maybe eventually selling replacements to other producers," Kelcee said. "Because we lost Tom and his ranch, we had to build a good amount of ewe lambs quickly. We needed 600 right away and to make that conversion to supplying our own replacements as quickly as possible.

The ranch now has 400 head of half-Dohne yearling ewes and 600 head of half-Dohne ewe lambs.

"One of the concerns Ryan and I had is that we need tough sheep to make it in this winter country, and we've always had tough sheep. We wanted to make sure we didn't lose that. So far, they've done just fine and handled the winters pretty well. We're only crossbreds so far on the ranch, but the bucks have held up and the ewe lambs are doing great."

And the change has paid off in the wool quality that everyone in the family was looking to improve.

"I don't think we even had a specific number in mind to be honest," Kelcee said. "We had been in the 22 to 23 micron range for so long. So, when we started seeing numbers in the teens in the first year, I was just amazed. Anything better would have been good. We were definitely suffering with short, coarse wool."

The fiber diameter numbers on the initial half-blood Dohne ewe lambs were measured at 18.6 microns. The wool was noticeably whiter and longer, as well.

"That was a huge difference," Paul said. "It paid more per pound, so that part is working. Hopefully, it will just get better and better. Even the weights will probably be higher, but that's not necessarily something we're driving for. We don't want to lose anything on the lamb side. We're already seeing that everything on the wool side is better."

The crossbreds have also proven to be good mothers, which is crucial for the family's range-lambing flock.

"According to the propaganda on the breed, they selected for that," Paul said.

"But more importantly, I believe what I hear from Ryan and from Toledo (longtime herder Toledo Echevarria Penez)," Renae said. "They're out there with the ranch flock every day and they're telling us these sheep are good moms. That

means a lot to me."

In their mid-60s now, Paul and Renae said they'd reached a point in life where they either had to take action on improving the flock's wool or just give up entirely and leave it to the next generation to figure out.

"Even at our age, we want to be doing something and to have a purpose in life," Paul said. "We like the industry. We like the sheep. They are such efficient animals, and they fit this country really well. If we're going to have sheep, we might as well have good sheep.

"There's not a huge margin in this industry, so if we could find a way for the sheep to be more productive and generate more revenue, then that would help the ranch continue to thrive."

"Ryan said the other day that the perfect mix is probably going to be a 3/4-blood Dohne," Renae added. "That's what he'd like to get the ranch flock to. He's really liking those white sheep."

While it wasn't the primary goal, Paul and Renae would also like to see the flock get slightly smaller in size. Ewes on the ranch are in the 200-pound range these days, where they used to weigh in about 165 pounds.

"I've seen it in the cattle industry where they got to a 1,700 and 1,800-pound cow and it produced a slightly bigger calf, but it didn't account for the increase in resources that they needed to get there," Paul said. "I think the whole cattle industry has now moderated back to a smaller cow. I think we're going to see the same thing in the sheep industry."

Or maybe, the next trend will be working to improve wool quality, for which we can thank the Neilsons. 🐏





Finer, brighter, longer wool is exactly what the Neilsons were hoping to see after introducing Dohne Merino bloodlines to their Columbia-based ranch flock.