

**Strategies
to
Eliminate Inherited Pigmentation
in
Australian Merino Sheep.**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of the
University of New England**

Submitted December 2007.

Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Signature

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Prof Julius van der Werf and Dr Yutao Li for taking me on as a student, for allowing me to work with a large degree of independence and for lasting the journey.

I am grateful for the generous support of my partner Clare and for the patience often extended to me by our family, Shiara, Melanie, Alexandra and Jacinta.

I acknowledge the financial support given me through a scholarship from the Australian Sheep Industry Co-operative Research Centre, subsequently the Co-operative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation, and I particularly commend them for the opportunities offered to network with their scientists and other postgraduate students.

Special mention is due to those who have given me particular support or advice: Scott Dolling for his keen and enduring interest in coloured sheep and their genetics; Deb Maxwell of the Sheep CRC for her involvement in field work, for her communication skills, and for allowing me access to the survey of breeders; and to Trevor Mahar of Australian Wool Testing Authority Ltd for explaining dark fibre detection and for allowing me use of dark fibre testing data.

I am also conscious of the contributions that many, many people have made to my journey in science, rural science and genetics – teachers, lecturers, mentors and colleagues who by piquing my curiosity, tolerating my questions and nurturing my talent, have inspired me to dream and prodded me to action. These are too many to name but I am privileged to count many as friends.

Finally to the University of New England, for the opportunities I have enjoyed I am proud to be linked to this community of learning through both of my degrees, and I hope that for many years to come you will continue to strive to equip outstanding graduates with the abilities and confidence to change the world.

*Baa, baa, Merino, have you any spots?
Yes sir, yes sir, rather a lot:
One gene from my sire and one from my dame,
And incomplete penetrance — oh, what a shame.*

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Abstract

The viability of eliminating inherited pigmentation from the Australian Merino flock by DNA technology was investigated as a means of reducing dark fibre contamination of white wool.

Two genetically distinct forms of inherited pigmentation are known. Symmetrical patterns follow simple recessive inheritance. Meanwhile the inheritance of piebald spots is uncertain. Inheritance models for piebald were assessed against new and prior field records to resolve this point, but a clear-cut conclusion was not possible at this time — further field experimentation is required.

Gene discovery for Mendelian characters by homozygosity mapping was reviewed and applied in simulation to livestock situations. The method was found to be efficient, powerful, robust, and readily adaptable to a wide range of gene discovery problems. In particular, modifications to the design of HM to suit livestock had a relatively small effect on experimental power in many cases.

For a ram-breeding flock, paternal culling in addition to phenotypic culling was found to be a highly effective strategy to reduce the frequency of undesirable pigmentation alleles as well as being cost-effective through reduction in the incidence of pigmented phenotypes. Taking steps to minimise allele frequency prior to the commencement of DNA gene testing also gave large benefits.

When DNA gene testing becomes available, early adoption and rapid elimination of pigmentation alleles were found to be preferable in most situations for ram breeding flocks. The costs of eliminating pigmentation alleles and the concomitant loss of selection intensity were found to be inversely proportional to the initial allele frequency. Across a spectrum of inheritance models (excluding simple dominance) the particular inheritance model had little additional effect. An efficient testing strategy could significantly reduce costs.

Economic analysis at the industry level has revealed the key costs and sources of revenue which would be affected by eliminating inherited pigmentation. While many factors were difficult to specify, the cost of DNA testing emerged as the most critical factor.

This study has demonstrated the technical potential of DNA technology to reveal many of the missing pieces of the puzzle of inherited pigmentation and its elimination from Merino flocks. DNA technology is vital to both gene discovery and gene testing for the presence of undesirable pigmentation alleles, and no practical alternatives exist.

The economic viability of widespread DNA gene testing is subject to many uncertainties at this time. However many industry players are keen to adopt gene testing even at quite a high test cost and the trend for the cost of a new technology to decline over time would improve the financial outcome. Meanwhile, indirect benefits through enhancing the reputation of Australian apparel wool could be substantial. While the uncertainty over the eventual returns from investments in research should prompt some caution, continuation of research in this field is encouraged.