

MIKE TATE

THE OMEGA LAMB PROJECT



The Omega Lamb Project, a Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme involving leading food company Alliance, Headwaters and the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), has developed Te Mana Lamb, a new kind of premium lamb. The demand for Te Mana Lamb following its commercial launch in premium restaurants in Hong Kong and New Zealand means new farmers are being sought for the project.

Escaping the commodity trap

New Zealand has struggled for some time to escape the commodity trap. Exporters have been despatching undifferentiated commodities like lamb to customers in the four corners of the world for more than a century. However, there has been significant progress in the red meat sector to break away from this 'race to the bottom', with a number of initiatives and programmes underway.

One programme, which was formed in 2015 and where there is evidence of innovation and a move towards change from farmers and partners, is the Omega Lamb Project. This is a PGP programme involving leading food company Alliance, a group of innovative farmers known as Headwaters, and MPI. The project has developed Te Mana Lamb, which is a good illustration of what can be

achieved. It is creating new value for lamb and sparking a renaissance in the global appetite for New Zealand's premium meats.

Genesis of the project

The genesis of the Omega Lamb Project began with a programme to produce sheep with the fat levels needed to better breed and thrive in the South Island's high-altitude pastures and conditions. It was while breeding sheep to be healthier and better adapted to this harsher high-country environment that it was realised that the fats in lamb (not lean muscle) that were the key, both for the animal and the consumer.

This led to 10 years of scientific search, discovery and natural breeding of sheep with a different type of fat, an intramuscular fat, higher in omega-3 with marbling on a micro-scale – something never before seen in lamb. Those involved in the project took this new breed and researched rearing locations and conditions, farming practices and finishing grazing to produce an entirely new lamb eating experience. All this was achieved using natural breeding, and outdoor pasture-based farming, but underpinned by modern individual animal recording and product analysis.

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Staff at the Omega Lamb project have worked hard to develop the precise combination of genetics, management and feeding to alter the fat profile of the lamb. It has involved a focus on a very different way of doing things, through a partnership between breeders, finishers, marketers and distributors, with the aim of adding value to the total system – not just to any individual part.

Exceptional meat qualities

The goal has been to produce the world's tastiest and healthiest lamb. The outcome is an animal with exceptional meat qualities, well suited to our high-country conditions, with a unique genetic profile and nutrition that enhances omega-3 levels.

The animals are a selection of New Zealand white-faced breeds bred specifically by Headwaters for the Omega Lamb Project. Hundreds of genetic lines are screened for taste and fat characteristics. Because the breed was developed by the project the parentage of these lambs can be traced right back to the first sires. Animals are selected only at the very top end of natural variation in omega-3 and polyunsaturated content for lamb, and they are then farmed in systems that further enhance omega-3 levels. The process is now complete to make official 'Source of Omega-3' on a pack claim for some cuts.

The project has been built on an all-natural farming system, integrating unique genetics with specially developed agronomy. Lambs are bred in the high country and exclusively grass fed. Post-weaning, they are moved to lowland farms to be finished on specially developed chicory herb-based pastures.

The lambs have greater stores of muscle glycogen, low pH and exceptional and consistent taste, tenderness, succulence and colour with rich marbling, including the omega-3 fats. The meat also doesn't behave like regular lamb when cooking. Because it is full of 'good fat', it has essentially less moisture. That means it doesn't suffer shrinkage, retains its shape, flavour and texture and is more versatile.

Marketing

Te Mana Lamb was launched in New Zealand and Hong Kong this year, with plans for a wider roll out underway. It is not a supermarket lamb. It is a premium product aimed at the fine dining market, and the reaction from that market has been exceptional.

In January, the Omega Lamb Project brought leading New Zealand chefs and food writers from across the country together to try the lamb and visit some of the farms involved in the project. Their response was that this is a lamb like no other – delicately-flavoured, clean and succulent, and without the strong odour associated with traditional lamb.

That has also been the wider feedback as Te Mana Lamb has been rolled out to fine dining restaurants here and in Hong Kong. Chefs are saying it is proving popular with diners who do not usually like lamb and provides scope to use it in new ways. In Hong Kong it has even being served thinly sliced on sushi.

World's best lamb

It is driving a whole new approach to lamb, and the reaffirmation of New Zealand as the home of the world's best lamb. It is also an opportunity to increase the total value of lamb in this country.

Te Mana Lamb is a luxury ingredient and priced at that level. In the marketplace, it has been compared to Wagyu beef, truffles and caviar for products which diners can justify paying a premium for. Since July, it has also been supplied through chef Nadia Lim's 'My Food Bag' home delivery gourmet bag service.

The results are very encouraging, but these are still early days and this is still a pilot project. One thing that is clear is that the demand for new authentic, quality products at the top end the market is large and real.

Adding value and team effort

Every farmer wants to maximise the opportunities available to them. However, the Omega Lamb Project takes the approach that to truly add value to a farm you have to look at the entire value chain. The programme works as a partnership, with the onus on creating greater overall value into the system, which everyone in the chain can ultimately share in. Pulling together that whole value chain has been a large undertaking. To achieve that requires intensive input from team members, from geneticists to farm consultants. Gilbert Enoka, who also provides mental skills coaching to the All Blacks, has been brought in to work with the project's breeders and finishers about how to behave as a high-functioning team.

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EID tagging and scaling up

When you are changing practice on a farm there is inevitably a bedding-in period. For our programme, this has included getting to grips with the technology. All the lambs need to be electronic-identification (EID) tagged. That has probably been the biggest challenge for many of our pilot farmers, but in the third year of our programme it is steadily becoming more common practice. With support from the project team, these farmers are working through this very well. All have passed the audit developed for the Omega Lamb Project and are looking at continuing with the programme for the 2018 season.

The challenge now is to scale up the system, to grow Te Mana Lamb from a pilot programme to a commercial model while retaining the essential disciplines. The system needs to be more streamlined and efficient and remove costs without compromising on quality.

Farmers and farm consultants

We also need to bring on board more breeders and finishers. They need to be willing to use the technology and to adapt to a common system and keep evolving it to get better and better results. Only by following a system with genetics, and prescribed finishing, recording of key events, and responsiveness to quality feedback, can chefs be provided with the quality they are looking for, every time.

A farm consultant who works in conjunction with the project liaises with breeders and finishers very regularly, usually on a weekly basis. Planning starts about 18 months out, with breeders planning the mating programme and which animals they will put the Omega ram with, and how they will structure their farm plan so they move animals with the right specifics at the right time.

With finishers, the farm consultant will look at how the programme can fit onto the farm. This is looking at the climatic conditions, whether it is complementary to the rest of their business, and what they can do to meet the required timeframes. The aim is to build a strategy that does not compromise the profitability of any of the farmers, while enabling lambs to be supplied when the chicory can handle it.

Other support

During the December to May finishing period much time is spent with breeders to help them make the call on when to move stock, and with finishers to determine how many



lambs they can accommodate and what their projected growth rates will be.

Support is also provided around agronomics. Chicory forage is quite expensive to get established and the aim is to get two to three years out of it, ensuring a sustainable diet so the lambs can grow at the optimal weight. This support for the pilot farmers is gradually reducing over time, as they have become accustomed to the processes and are very good at handling these aspects themselves.

For suppliers, key factors include the capacity to have store lambs for supply to finishing programmes in late December to early January. For finishers, they include input costs, the ease of procuring animals, the performance and longevity of chicory, the additional uses of the chicory in the spring, and the lambs' arrival and exit value. Typically, our finishers have an accomplished lamb finishing/cropping operation with a track record of innovation and high production.

Rewards for farmers

As for these rewards, there is still quite a lot of cost in the system, but it is essential to spend to build the market so these kinds of costs will reduce over time. Once this has been achieved, the returns to farmers will grow. The PGP's aspirational goal is for a 30% increase in farm gate returns for the lambs over time.

In the early phase, market returns are covering extra costs so farmer returns are equivalent to other lamb options. The larger issue for the farmers involved is that existing lamb options are not always returning as much as other stock classes or business alternatives, so lamb is being reduced or used opportunistically to 'fill gaps' in the farm business. The attraction of Te Mana Lamb is not the immediate returns, but that it provides a pathway for lamb to be once more the primary profit centre and focus for hill farm and intensive finishing operations.

Delivering examples of successful, added-value ventures such as Te Mana Lamb is good for the whole industry. The farmers involved have embraced change and the results they are seeing are promising. They have identified that the programme has something for them that fits with their existing business, offering significant potential, not just for them but for the New Zealand sheep industry.

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