

# Headwaters lamb making headway

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**A**N AMBITIOUS sheep-breeding group believes it has struck the sweet spot in developing a lamb meat taste worthy of premium prices.

The Headwaters breed has been sold into high-end Auckland restaurants and into Hong Kong and was being well received, the group's general manager Ian Hercus said.

After putting 15,000 qualifying lambs into the processing pool last season, it was too soon to talk about getting a premium price for the product.

The numbers this year were on track to be 30,000 and that would give the group a pointer to price.

The sweet spot was a combination of the level of good fat in the meat – intramuscular polyunsaturated fat and Omega-3 fatty acids – as the consumer market moved away from the requirement for lean meat.

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Asked to describe those very technical good fat terms, Hercus said they were interpreted as meat that was succulent with a great feel in the mouth, tender and with a flavour that was not too strongly “lamby”.

“When you eat it, you know, we think we've nailed the sweet spot right now.”

Market response was positive and Hercus said several blind-tasting trials showed “an almost night and day difference from standard lamb”.

Wanaka-based Hercus has been with the Headwaters group for two and a half years and said there

has been some serendipity in the results since the group started in 2006.

High on that list was the swing in the market in the last couple of years towards a favourable fat content and away from lean lamb requirements of earlier years.

Headwaters had started as a growers group intent on breeding the best sheep it could for high country farming and recognising ewes required a certain fat level to thrive in that environment.

The group found that also led to fast-growing lambs and further trials showed putting the lambs on chicory pasture after weaning also boosted growth.

The growers also had a vision of lifting their lambs out of the commodity product class.

There were now 45 farms involved, mostly on hill country in the southern South Island where Headwaters started but with others further afield and in the North Island, including some on down-country farms where the breed also did very well.

Ewe condition remained the main focus because that was seen as optimal for the lamb and thus consumers.

The best lambs were achieving an average 3% intramuscular fat (in loin) compared to 1% to 2% for standard lambs.

That was impressive for a pasture-fed animal less than six months old, Hercus said.

Headwaters has been boosted in the last two years by involvement in a Primary Growth Partnership Omega Lamb Project with the Ministry for Primary Industries and meat processor and exporter Alliance Group. The spend would be \$25 million over seven years.

Hawke's Bay geneticist Aimee Charteris, who was involved in the Headwaters research from the start, remained contracted to the project.

The lambs were processed and marketed by Alliance, which was also responsible for product development.

The early focus was on premium cuts but the intent was to turn all parts of the carcass into higher-value products, Hercus said.

By the end of seven years, the



**NAILED IT:** Headwaters Lamb has hit the sweet spot, general manager Ian Hercus says.

partners hoped to produce a million lambs a year for top-end markets.

How many of them would be top-of-the-range Headwaters Omega lambs wasn't known, Hercus said.

The Omegas make up the 15,000 lambs sold into the food-service market last year and the targeted 30,000 for this year.

That was out of a total of 230,000 lambs produced by the group this year. The animals had to be tested structurally perfect to reach Omega status but the two other brackets Sigma and Delta also produced high-health, high-taste lambs.

A lot of it would come down to what suited the farmer.

As further genetic development and research results were achieved, more and more lambs each year would go through as Omega. Chicory was the favoured feed now but further research could lead to something different in the next few years.

“The whole PGP focus is to lift the value of all lambs and it's clear that some people will pay a lot of money for the meat taste they want,” Hercus said.

“We're hoping that Omega will be the hero product that pulls the rest up.”

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The group thinks it can get up to a million lambs in the seven years. The main limiting factor was the ability to produce the rams.

Last autumn, 214 new sires were released to 10 Headwaters farms, adding to the 153 put out last year. They were selected from 2000 rams, progeny-tested for maternal growth, carcass merit, intramuscular fat and long-chain Omega-3 traits. Availability was growing by about 20% to 30% a year.

The Headwater animals were a crossbred sheep, developed from the Romney, Texel, Finn and Perendale breeds.

For Hercus, the Headwaters work was an extension of his own farming career. He wasn't a genetics expert but for many years was involved in implementing that work as Landcorp's South Island manager.

Then for about eight years till he joined headwaters in 2014 he

had overall management of the Blue River dairy sheep project in Southland, again using modern animal performance and genetic technology.

“The big difference is that at Blue River we did all the work there ourselves and it was a huge challenge on a stand-alone basis, whereas here we've got MPI and Alliance and our group, all with specific skills but everyone working for the common good.”

“With MPI in, it's a well-managed programme and in farming there's a lot of things you can't do on your own. There's just not the spare cash for research and development.”

Despite the confidence around the Omega project, Hercus warned it was not a silver bullet for the sheep meat sector.

Under the PGP concept, the partners had an obligation to grow the business and they do get approaches from farmers looking to take up the Headwaters breed.

Farmers needed to be prepared to buy in to the full concept and to play the long game. The scheme was not there to provide short-term farming solutions.

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