

THE LAND

SE sheep
HD **Dorpers direct to door**
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AN EFFORT to make a much bigger profit from their commercial Dorper flock has led Narrabri sheep breeders Bill and Lyn Guest into a partnership with a regional online marketer.

The Guests run Dalman Downs Dorpers, known as 3D Dorpers, and they launched their online **business** through Paradise Fresh at Narrabri's Nosh on the Namoi food and **wine** festival last month.

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The Guests have **sold** their commercial stock direct to processors since starting the enterprise 13 years ago as a hobby.

In the first decade, the Guests worked hard to set up markets for their rams and ewes but they were "stopped dead in their tracks" by the Ovine Johne's Disease debacle of 2012 which severely curtailed the seedstock **business**.

Last year, they moved on to live export their sheep to **China**.

"In the earlier years, we focused on our ewe and ram production for seedstock," Mr Guest said.

The wethers were just the other half of the **business** and were **sold** to processors when finished.

"We're still very much stud- orientated, but we've started to live export to **China** and the Philippines."

The buyers come to the property to inspect the sheep, which are tested for disease then sent to Melbourne for a 60-day quarantine period.

Concern about bluetongue, an insect-borne viral disease, stopped that market, despite the sheep showing no signs of the disease.

"We have stock that have been inspected and selected to go overseas that should have gone the first week in February," Mr Guest said.

"With all this happening and the drought we had to look at our ways of value-adding our sheep."

When he was offered \$4 a kilogram for his lambs by a processor in November, he started questioning the retail process.

"When that lamb's cuts are averaging \$16 in retail outlets, we were getting 25 per cent of the retail dollar which is just not sustainable," he said.

After a few quick calculations, the Guests decided to change their **business**.

"Everybody talks about the drought and the cost of feeding our stock, but what knocks Australian farmers about more than anything is we're just not getting enough to make a profit," Mr Guest said.

"In a good season running costs of a ewe for 12 months is about \$40.

"When a lamb is weaned at 30 kilograms, it's another \$30 to get it up to 46kg ready for the processors.

"With our lambs dressing at 23kg for \$4 a kilogram, it would give us \$92 a lamb.

"When you take out levies and freight that's another \$8 a head, so they became \$84 lambs with only a \$14 net profit.

"If you're producing 2000 lambs that's \$28,000 for the year. That's not much money."

Mr Guest set to work researching the market to see where the other 75pc of the retail dollar was going to and how he could sell direct to customers.

He said he was worried his Dorpers were becoming a "generic" lamb cut on the supermarket shelf, being bought and **sold** with all other types of lamb.

"The first thing we did was make sure we had the supply and we've got that covered, then we need to find an abattoir," he said.

"The closest is 350 kilometres away at Millmerran (Queensland), then we found a butcher at Pittsworth (Qld) and a chiller to carry the boxed lamb."

Newly-crowned national sausage king Jade Thompson is butchering the lambs.

"He's doing all cuts plus lamb sausages so I'm sure, with his new title, they'll be okay," Mr Guest said.

Finding an outlet was the easy part of the new venture.

"I came across Paradise Fresh at Narrabri which lets me sell my meat online to the local area," he said.

"I've already had some feedback and customers love the meat."

The only drawback has been convincing customers to **buy** a half or full lamb.

"People who eat a lot of meat are no problem, but there are still many customers who would prefer to shop a few times a week instead of buying in bulk," Mr Guest said.

"The savings from buying in bulk far outweigh the cost of running a freezer, but I think that will come with time."

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