The financial value of a carcass is influenced by its lean meat yield percentage, which represents the proportion of the carcass that is lean meat (muscle).

Australian and international consumers prefer cuts of meat that are large and lean. To meet this consumer preference, Australian lamb producers select for lean meat yield percentage indirectly via three existing Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs): post-weaning weight, c-site fat depth, and eye muscle depth. These breeding values are used to select for improved growth, leanness and muscling, respectively.

The effects of selection using the ASBVs have previously been investigated using indicators like muscle depths, and weights of specific cuts. However, the breeding values have not been quantified in terms of the change in whole carcass muscle composition or distribution of muscle between carcass regions.

Methods and results

Lambs were born and raised at one of six research sites across Australia from 2007 to 2010. 1,665 lambs of known genetics (ASBVs) were slaughtered at a target carcass weight of 23kg, with slaughter age ranging from 168 to 420 days of age. Carcasses underwent computed tomography (CT) scanning within 72 hours of slaughter to determine the proportions of fat, muscle, and bone. Prior to scanning, the carcasses were split into three (fore-, saddle or mid-, and hind-sections) to enable more rapid post scanning processing of the CT images for the distribution analysis.

Eye muscle depth. Sires of high eye muscle depth breeding values had lambs with a greater proportion of muscle. Lambs from sires of the highest eye muscle depth breeding values had 7.7% more muscle than those from the lowest breeding value sires (Figure 1). This muscle was preferentially distributed to the saddle (mid-) section, where muscle weight increased by 3.8%, at the expense of muscle in the fore-section of the carcass.

C-site fat depth. The lambs from sires with the lowest breeding values for c-site fat depth (i.e. very lean sires) had 9.5% more muscle than the lambs from sires that had...
the highest c-site fat depth breeding values. Similar to the eye muscle depth breeding value, there was a preferential increase in saddle section muscle weight.

Post-weaning weight. Increasing sire post-weaning weight breeding value only increased lamb carcass muscling at some sites and over some years. This breeding value increased the amount of muscle in the saddle region by up to 4%.

Conclusions and recommendations
Selecting for Australian Sheep Breeding Values can increase lamb carcass muscle mass and result in a redistribution of muscle to the saddle region — the more valuable lamb meat cuts.

This experiment has for the first time allowed the impact of ASBVs to be quantified at a whole body level, rather than just using cut weights and carcass tissue depths to indicate these trends. The results demonstrate the large and favorable impact that the c-site eye muscle and fat depth ASBVs have on muscle within the lamb carcass, with an impact of the post weaning weight breeding value on carcass muscle more limited. All three carcass breeding values increased muscle in the highly valued saddle section which will increase carcass value.

Results of this experiment will be used to determine the financial gains of using carcass ASBVs to improve carcass composition in addition to the improvements in hot carcass weight that they provide.

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Acknowledgements
The CRC for Sheep Industry Innovation is supported by the Australian Government’s Cooperative Research Centre Program, Australian Wool Innovation Ltd. and Meat & Livestock Australia.