



Dean Ferguson, "Locksley", Armatree, in the hydroponics shed with some eight-day-old barley ready to feed out to lambs destined for the export market.

## Hydroponic seedling system a feed winner at Armatree

ARMATREE-BASED lamb producers Dean and Mark Ferguson, "Locksley", are finishing 500 crossbred lambs for heavyweight contracts on barley seedlings grown by using a hydroponic system.

The Ferguson brothers are members of the Tooraweenah Prime Lamb Marketing Co-operative which specialises in producing even lines of top quality heavy lambs for monthly delivery.

Using their "Fodder Factory" hydroponics system, the Fergusons are producing 20cm barley shoots from seed in just eight days, while using 12,000 litres of water and \$16 worth of fertiliser a week.

In those eight days, a kilogram of Schooner barley seed will produce around eight kilograms of green feed, enough to feed five lambs a day.

Tests have shown the protein content of the feed at 18 per cent, but to compensate for low energy levels the Fergusons combine it with dry

"It is possible to produce other feed in the shed, although barley has proven to be the most successful. Oats didn't grow as fast as barley and a wheat trial didn't stand up to the amount of water used. Mr Ferguson said corn grew slightly slower than barley, but could be also successfully produced. Last year the brothers fed 250 Merino lambs on the hydroponic barley and some grain oats. Part of the flock was tagged and weighed as an experiment and the sheep were found to gain an average 10kg in seven weeks.

"We did a lot of things wrong then, but still achieved pleasing results," Mr Ferguson said.

With such a reliable and economic feed source, the Fergusons have been able to buy in lambs and finish them for heavyweight contracts.

"We regard the system as an insurance when filling contracts. We know what we are going to get for our lambs; we know how much it is going to cost us to feed them, so we can then work out how much we can afford to buy them