

GETTING YOUR FLOCK THROUGH DRY TIMES A PRODUCERS EXPERIENCE

Over the Summer and Autumn of 2012, many livestock producers in the South East were faced with dry conditions, scarce pastures, and fast emptying hay sheds and silage stores. As we are replenishing our hay and silage stores this year, it is probably a good time to review the experience of one farming business with confinement feeding and agistment; both in the 2006 drought and the 2012 dry times with help from Tiffany Bennett from RuralSolutions SA.



Lessons learnt in 2006

In 2006 Josie and Jamie confinement fed 1000 ewes. Ewes in confinement were fed a combination of barley, silage and barley straw which worked out to 2.5kg of barley per week, 2kg of straw per week and 2kg of silage per week.

The pens were built using existing structures with the use of cyclone and droppers. For example the end of a laneway was used for one pen and the corner of a paddock for another. Weld mesh was placed around trees to protect them. A portable trough hooked up to an existing pipeline was used for water. Metal troughing was used for feeding out grain but this required a lot of labor to keep clean.

Confinement feeding feed costs in 2006 cost \$18 per ewe to feed them from October 2006 through to April 2007. Following this the sheep were let out onto green feed and required little supplementary feeding. Tiffany Bennett said it was a critical time when letting sheep back out onto pastures following confinement feeding.

Often producers lose high numbers of sheep after spending the money to get them through dry times. Pastures are often high in protein and low in fibre which is a very different diet to the fibre and grain diet offered in a confinement feeding situation. The provision of hay

and letting the animals out of confinement for small periods of time onto pasture will help alleviate issues.

The Jackson's agisted steers and sheep locally and at Warnambool but this provided some unique challenges. The agistment sourced locally had no yard facilities available and therefore portable yards had to be carted when required and water infrastructure also required attention.

When confinement feeding, keep it simple, use what you have on the farm and ensure that you have access to water, shade and easy access from your feed stores to the confinement area.

The cattle agisted at Warnambool were on excellent feed, however the Jacksons would have been financially better off selling the cows with calves at foot than placing them on agistment. Late calvers with calves at foot were sold for \$1030 whilst the rest went on agistment from early September through to the end of January. The calves from the cows on agistment were weaned and sold for \$500 and the cows sold for \$700. Taking in the cost of transport, travel and time to check the animals at Warnambool and agistment costs

the Jacksons would have been better off selling them along with the late calving cows. Josie also said when comparing agistment and confinement feeding it was easier to confinement feed as it eliminated the travelling costs and the challenges associated with agistment. In addition the sheep that were confinement fed were very quiet to handle in comparison to those that returned from agistment.

Tiffany said those who have spent a lot of money on genetics, have a seedstock flock or herd that would be difficult to replace following a long dry period could consider the option of agistment. This could be a cost effective option rather than feeding long term on the home property but disease status of the herd needs to be taken into consideration.

Confinement feeding in 2012

In 2012 Josie and Jamie used the confinement feeding facilities again to help maintain ewe condition cost effectively and keep sheep from degrading paddocks. They confinement fed 560 of their merino breeding ewes from February 2012 to April 2012. The ewes were introduced to grain two weeks prior to entry in the feedlot by trailing feeding 100- 200gms of grain per head every second day. This allowed the Jackson's to save perennial paddocks for the ewes to lamb down in. The confinement feeding ration over the week comprised of 2kg of barley per ewe per week and consumption of 2.5-3kg of a roughage source which included a mixture of pasture silage, lucerne hay or pasture hay, all of which were good quality. A loose lick mineral mix was also available ad lib.

The ewes still required hand feeding once they were let out of confinement to lamb, but the paddocks were less degraded and the ewes were in half a condition score better than those that had not been confined. The confinement fed ewes had a lamb marking percentage of 120% whilst the remainder of the ewes split over two

mobs that weren't confined had marking percentages of 100% in one mob and 110% in the other. Confinement fed sheep seemed to be quieter and tolerate human intervention better.

Josie said that it was important that you did not allow the lambing ewes to become hungry when having to supplementary feed in a paddock as this would lead to a greater chance of mis-mothering. The Jackson's achieved this by ensuring the ewes never ran out of hay and they were then fed grain every second or third day.

Tiffany said that there were many reports of mis-mothering as a result of supplementary feeding when lambing with marking percentages as low as 60% on some properties. She believes this was a result of ewes being in poor condition and not being fed adequate amounts. A strategy using ad lib hay and lick feeders for grain during lambing to minimize disturbance and ensuring ewes do not fall below condition score 2.5 at lambing would reduce the incidence of mis-mothering. Troughing was not used in 2012 as the rubble road located in the pens provided a hard surface on which to feed the ewes. The troughing used in 2006 created too much additional labour to keep clean.

In summary the Jackson's have found confinement feeding an excellent tool to help them manage their livestock during a tough season or during seasons in which a late autumn break occurs. It does not need to be a costly purpose built facility and producers should look to see what existing structures can be modified to be used during times when confinement feeding is needed. Less damage to paddocks means that the paddocks recover quickly once a dry period ends and livestock that are maintained in better condition will retain productivity. For more information on confinement feeding and agistment of sheep, there some excellent resources available in the agconnectse library at www.agconnectse.org.au

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Producers Josie and Jamie Jackson

Location Willalooka

Property Area 760 ha

Enterprises 1400 Merino Ewes joined Border Leicester and Black Suffolk rams, 300 Wiltipol x Dorper ewes joined to Wiltipol rams, 60 shorthorn cows joined to Limousin bulls

Rainfall 500mm

Jamie and Josie's main focus for confinement feeding and agisting is preventing degradation of soil and pastures on their property, and maintaining ewe condition score and general ewe health.

