

Stock containment areas: improving animal nutrition



Above: Bangerang farmer Tim Hewitt. Photo: BCG.

In June 2011, a forum was held for north west Victorian farmers which aimed to increase their knowledge and skills in livestock management, nutrition, animal health, marketing and logistics, with a particular focus on the strategic use of stock containment management practices to help prevent soil health degradation.

Tim Hewitt was one of four farmers who after attending the forum, successfully applied for a grant to receive one-on-one support from a livestock industry specialist to improve his skills in productive and profitable stock containment.

On the Hewitt's farm at Bangerang in the southern Mallee, there have always been sheep but in recent years, Tim admits his focus has been cropping. He said he has spent a lot of time learning about cropping but now there's more he'd like to know about sheep.

"We want to develop a more robust sheep enterprise that will fit in with our cropping program," Tim said.

"By learning better ways to supplement feed sheep – especially during dry times – we can hold on to stock for longer and increase lambing rates."

Containment of stock and supplement feeding during dry times protects vegetation cover on soils, reducing risk of wind erosion.

Tim said he was particularly keen to find out more about animal nutrition to get a handle on the best feed for pregnant ewes and to maximise live lamb percentages.

"I'm keen to know more about the science behind the nutrition requirements of sheep rather than just using our intuition," Tim explained.

Key learning

Following the forum, Tim received a site visit from industry specialist, Hamish



At a glance

Location: Bangerang

Livestock enterprise: 650 merino ewes joined to Poll Dorset/White Suffolk rams for prime lamb production

Cropping mix: wheat, barley and canola

Mean annual rainfall: 395mm

Soil: clay loam

Dickson who recommended a stock containment area design.

Tim was considering how he would use a containment area on the property, particularly when paddock feed is not adequate for ewes to lamb.

He said the information received gave him more confidence about how and when to use containment areas.

A calendar of operations was established which revealed a feed gap between March and May. It was suggested that as stubble availability reduces or ewes enter late pregnancy (six weeks pre-lambing), ewes could be moved to the containment area to manage nutrition.

"We have been feeding sheep oats, clover hay and cereal hay," Tim said.

"In autumn, we'll test the feed to check whether it's suitable and meeting nutrition requirements. We'll then get a design ration – something we haven't done before. There's no use giving feed to sheep if it's not the right type or quantity."

It was advised that oats and lupins are often the most suitable grain to use due to their low acidosis risk, with grain diets best formulated seasonally to allow for differences in quality and price.

Ewes coming off vetch or oats and then stubbles are typically in over fat condition as they approach late pregnancy. Splitting ewes into 'fats' and 'thins' before they go on to stubbles could help ensure thin ewes had first access to stubbles with large amounts of grain available.

Ewes could be supplemented with a lime and salt mix (85% lime, 15% salt)



Photo: Department Primary Industries.

over summer while grazing stubbles. In the longer term, it was recommended to move lambing to start in early June when ewes can go on to an oats/vetch mix to lamb.

"We had already been doing some of the things that Hamish suggested, but weren't as sure about feed quantity, type and timing," Tim said.

Next steps

According to Tim, taking part in the one-on-one mentoring initiative was a positive experience.

"Better nutrition equals better woolcuts and lambing percentages," Tim said.

"The information I received helped me appreciate how some extra structure and planning can achieve better production from the same inputs."

In the longer term, Tim sees the benefit in having a follow-up site visit in 12 months to see how effective the information has

been and to ensure he is correctly using the advice received.

Tim said he was also looking forward to hearing from others about how improved nutrition has been used in their farming business.

Further information

To find out more about the benefits of building a stock containment area and how to manage stock on your farm, visit www.malleecma.vic.gov.au or contact the Mallee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) on 5051 4377 to receive a free copy of a DVD containing advice from San Jolly, a leading animal nutritionist.

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Project Partners



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