

CASE STUDY



Utilising a feedlot for confinement feeding of lambs

Snapshot

Producer:

Ian Gardner (pictured)
'Stratford', Wean
23 kms north of Gunnedah

Area: 1,820ha

Mixed farming enterprise,
mostly sheep and cattle



Background

Motivated by the need to save time and increase efficiency and capacity, sheep producer Ian Gardner expanded his existing feedlot operation during the recent drought.

After weighing the financial costs and time involved in construction, it was the challenge of managing the time-consuming process of confinement feeding which saw Ian invest in the expansion of the feedlot and the addition of automated feeders.

Originally used as an opportunity or seasonal feedlot with the capacity to feed 1000 – 1200 lambs, the decision to extend his feedlot infrastructure further increased capacity up to 2,000 head. It allowed Ian to early wean lambs at eight weeks as part of his drought management strategy and helped maintain his reduced flock of 1,200 Dorper ewes in good breeding condition.

What was involved

Each confinement pen was designed to allow approximately 4 - 6m² per head and allowed for 300 head in total. Ian decided to increase his operation from four to eight pens to capitalise on the benefits of confinement feeding.

The pens incorporated 10T silos in each, ensuring there was adequate grain storage for a pen of 300 lambs on a full ration, mixing every ten days or so. A new watering set up was included using PVC pipe which replaced the older troughs which were too big and difficult to clean.

Grain was sourced off-farm, and the ration consisted of 80% barley, 15% cracked lupin and 5% buffer. Lambs consumed approximately 1.3 kg per day, going into the feedlot for finishing off at roughly 18 - 25 kgs, and spending about 12 weeks in total.

Auto feeders were incorporated into the feedlot system and were mainly used for induction, although a full ration can also be used for the lambs if needed. The auto feeders can usually feed 150 on an induction (usually taking between 10 - 14 days) or 300 on a full ration.

The lambs were trail fed on the ewes before going into the feedlot, and in the future, Ian felt the process would work better to ensure the best induction if he first used creep feeding before introducing the lambs to the feedlot.

The auto feeders are run on batteries and timers and are powered by a solar panel which keeps the battery charged. The timer is set up for how often and for how long they are fed. By the end of induction, lambs fed every hour from 6 am to 10 pm.

They can be run remotely by phone and advise the producer when the system turns on and off. The inclusion of a 300-degree camera also allows remote supervision of livestock and water availability.

Benefits

The feedlot gave Ian the option of early weaning and allowed him to keep production going by allowing 70 - 87% of ewes to get in lamb again.

It was economically efficient to wean the lambs and manage nutrition separately for ewes and lambs.

Incorporating auto feeders helped with the induction process and the management of shy feeders, which affected between 10 - 20% of the mob.

The auto feeders are easily accessed by the sheep and the sensors on the system keep the feed topped up. This allows for small feeds throughout the day on demand rather than waiting for someone to be available to feed the stock, with large time intervals between feeds.

Feeding in confined areas during dry time reduces the time travelling around the property to feed stock and also helps maintain ground cover on the rest of the property.

Feedlots can increase capacity and add flexibility and diversification to an operation for the future by allowing the producer to opportunistically feedlot lambs when markets are favourable.

Summary

Using a feedlot for confinement feeding during dry times can be an effective drought management strategy for lamb producers. Feedlots can significantly increase capacity and efficiency and, if your budget allows, the use of auto feeders can make confinement feeding much less labour intensive.

Further information

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Key learning and advice

With the use of the feedlot, Ian was able to wean lambs early during the drought.

Ewes were able to continue breeding through the drought, thereby letting Ian stay in production.

The introduction of auto feeders made confinement feeding less labour intensive.

Auto feeders help with the induction process and managing the problem of shy feeders.

Creep feeding could be of benefit prior to introducing the lambs to the feedlot.

