

PDS Updates webinar Q&A: Unlocking containment success – practical tools for higher production

Tuesday 28 April 2026

This Q&A document supports the 'Unlocking containment success – practical tools for higher production' webinar, part of a national MLA Producer Demonstration Sites (PDS) Updates webinar series showcasing practical, producer-led projects delivering productivity and sustainability outcomes.

The webinar presented on-farm findings and learnings from two connected PDS projects delivered with the Barossa Improved Grazing Group. These projects explored the use of containment feeding systems to manage variable seasonal conditions, maintain ground cover, improve feed utilisation, and enhance ewe health and reproductive performance.

The session highlighted practical containment feeding strategies, including infrastructure options, ration formulation, and labour considerations, alongside key risks and management approaches related to ewe nutrition, mineral deficiencies, and animal health. Findings demonstrated improvements in lambing outcomes, pasture recovery, and overall production efficiency when containment systems were effectively implemented.

This document includes responses to questions raised during the webinar and additional questions submitted by participants. The webinar was presented by Deb Scammell, livestock consultant and nutritionist from Talking Livestock, with contributions from participating producers Pete and Georgie, who shared their on-farm experiences and insights from the PDS projects.

The responses reflect professional observations and practical experience from specific Producer Demonstration Sites and regional farming systems. They are intended to inform discussion and support decision-making rather than replace property-specific advice.

Q. What's a TMR?

A. TMR stands for Total Mixed Ration. It is a feeding system where all feed ingredients, such as forage, grain, and supplements, are mixed together into a single, balanced ration. This ensures animals receive a consistent intake of nutrients in every mouthful and helps reduce selective feeding, which is particularly important in containment feeding systems.

Q. Do you have an energy requirement guide for >75kg ewes?

A. Energy requirements are based on a ewe's standard reference weight, which is their bodyweight at condition score 3 - not their current liveweight if they are over- or under-conditioned. As ewe size increases, energy requirements can be scaled up using standard equations that adjust from base requirements (commonly around a 50 kg ewe). In practice, this means applying a multiplication factor to account for larger ewes, ensuring rations are matched to their true maintenance and production needs. Using lifetime ewe tables and the DSE multiplier for a larger standard reference weight you can determine the energy requirement for larger ewes.

Q. If scanning doesn't happen until 100 days, what's the (feeding approach) recommendation prior to scanning? Is it an average between single and twin?

A. Prior to scanning, it is recommended to feed ewes to a midpoint energy level between single- and twin-bearing requirements. In many systems in the Barossa region, scanning occurs earlier (around 80–90 days), but where this is delayed, maintaining a balanced, average ration helps ensure ewes are adequately supported without overfeeding.

During this period, the focus should be on maintaining ewes at a condition score of 3 to 3.5. Once pregnancy status is confirmed, ewes can then be split into management groups and fed more precisely according to whether they are carrying singles or multiples.

Q. If the season doesn't break, have you had any experience with actually lambing while in containment pens?

A. While it is possible for ewes to lamb following a period in containment, it is generally not recommended to lamb in the same containment pens. These environments can have higher manure loads, increased disease risk, and elevated worm burdens, which can impact ewe and lamb health.

In more challenging seasons, a practical alternative has been to move ewes out of containment into fresh paddocks or larger 'sacrifice' areas (e.g. scrub blocks) prior to lambing. These areas can still be supported with supplementary feeding (such as self-feeders and hay), but provide cleaner conditions, more space, and improved lambing outcomes. If you're using smaller area it's recommended that ewes have at least 20m²/ewe if they are lambing.

Mob size is also critical. For multiple-bearing ewes, smaller mob sizes are recommended – ideally well below 100 head if in a smaller area – to reduce mismothering and improve lamb survival.

Encouragingly, when nutrition is well managed, producers have achieved comparable lambing percentages to traditional systems, even following containment feeding during difficult seasons.

Q. How was water supplied i.e. through a trough, and were there any issues with contamination, dust etc in the water?

A. Water supply in containment systems within this PDS was generally managed using troughs, similar to lot feeding systems. Maintaining water quality is important, particularly given the dust and manure typically present in containment environments.

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To manage this, producers cleaned troughs frequently, often on a daily basis, to minimise contamination. Some sites also trialled filtration systems, which helped reduce dust entering the water.

In most cases, smaller volume troughs were used, allowing them to be emptied and cleaned regularly like practices used in lamb production feedlot. This approach helped maintain water quality and ensure adequate intake

Q. What strategies can be used for calcium, magnesium and sodium supplementation?

A. There are a range of approaches to mineral supplementation in containment systems. Common options include salt blocks and loose lick supplements, with loose licks often preferred as they are often lower in salt and fillers and higher in crucial vitamins and minerals.

Producers may use simple, home-mixed formulations (such as lime and salt) during early stages. However, as ewes approach lambing, it is generally recommended to move to a commercially formulated supplement that provides balanced levels of calcium, magnesium, sodium and key trace minerals.

A key challenge is ensuring adequate daily calcium intake, particularly in older ewes and those carrying multiples, where demand is significantly higher. Even with supplementation, meeting requirements can be difficult, increasing the risk of metabolic disorders such as hypocalcaemia.

Ongoing work is continuing to refine supplementation strategies, including identifying optimal delivery methods and improving consistency of intake for ewes in repeated or long-term containment systems.

Q. Did you confirm Campylobacter as cause of any abortions?

A. Campylobacter was not specifically confirmed as a cause of abortions within the PDS projects or presentation findings. The focus of the work was primarily on nutrition, mineral status, and management within containment systems, rather than detailed investigation of infectious abortion causes.

Industry context: Campylobacter is a recognised cause of abortion in sheep systems, and where abortion events occur, laboratory testing (e.g. foetal tissue and placental samples) is required to confirm the underlying cause and guide management.

Q. Can you feed out calcium as loose bulk mineral or do you prefer it to be put in a pellet/mix?

A. Within the PDS, loose lick supplements were generally the preferred approach for delivering calcium and other minerals in containment systems. Including simple home-mixed formulations (such as lime and magnesium salts) early on, with a shift to commercially formulated lick supplements closer to lambing to ensure appropriate calcium, magnesium and trace mineral levels.

A key consideration highlighted was that achieving adequate calcium intake can be challenging, particularly for older ewes and those carrying multiples, regardless of the supplementation method.

Ensuring consistent daily intake remains one of the main limitations when using free-choice mineral systems.

Q. Do you think ewes in containment have different acidosis risk than lambs? What is your experience with different buffers or virginiamycin if feeding high-risk cereals (e.g. wheat)?

A. Acidosis risk between ewes and lambs or evaluate specific additives such as buffers or virginiamycin was not directly compared within the scope of the PDS project. The PDS project focused primarily on nutrition, mineral supplementation and management in containment systems.

Ewes in containment systems can be at risk of ruminal acidosis, particularly when rations include high levels of rapidly fermentable cereals such as wheat. This occurs when grain is rapidly fermented in the rumen, producing acids that lower rumen pH.

Key management strategies to reduce risk include:

- Ensuring adequate roughage (fibre) is included in the ration to support rumen function
- Introducing grain gradually to allow rumen adaptation
- Maintaining consistent feeding management and avoiding sudden diet or intake changes

These risks are well recognised in containment and drought feeding systems, where high grain diets are commonly used and acidosis is one of the most frequently reported health issues.

Acidosis risk is often more pronounced in intensive lamb feeding systems, where higher grain inclusion rates are typically used; however, risk remains present in ewes if feeding is not carefully managed.

Deb Scammell, Talking Livestock, notes from her practical experience that:

“Any time acidosis is likely to be a risk, I would always recommend the use of a good rumen buffer and, in conjunction with correct grain introduction, this seems to have reduced any clinical symptoms of acidosis where high grain rations are used in containment. The current PDS is going to look closer at whether sub-clinical acidosis is still occurring in some systems.”

Further information: MLA provides a range of resources on containment feeding, grain introduction and animal health risks, including:

- [Containment feeding resources](#)
 - [Grain poisoning \(acidosis\) fact sheet – Making More From Sheep](#)
 - [Lamb and sheep emergency feeding fact sheet](#)
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Q. Learning about blood calcium measurements and the effect of age on these levels will be helpful.

A. The presentation highlighted that older ewes may be at greater risk of low blood calcium levels, particularly under containment feeding and when carrying multiples. It was noted that even with supplementation, meeting calcium requirements consistently can be difficult in these cohorts.

Further work is underway (outside this specific PDS dataset) to better understand:

- the relationship between age and calcium metabolism
- how effectively current supplementation strategies meet requirements
- practical ways to monitor and manage calcium status in containment systems.

This is an area identified for ongoing research and extension, rather than a fully resolved outcome from the current projects.

Q. Is there any benefit in larger pen size for ewes, say from 50m x 40m for 300 ewes to larger pen sizes?

A. Demonstrating and monitoring different pen sizes was not in scope of the original or current PDS projects. However, findings from the original PDS highlighted that stocking density and mob size are critical management considerations in containment feeding systems.

Key learnings from the PDS included:

- Maintaining adequate space allocation per ewe to reduce stress and competition. A stocking density of 7–10 m² works well in containment systems. Adequate trough space was also identified as critical to minimise shy feeders, particularly where all ewes are fed simultaneously in troughs.
- Managing mob size, particularly for multiple-bearing ewes, improved consistency. Once mob sizes exceeded approximately 300 ewes, the variation in ewe condition score within pens generally increased due to greater competition between animals. Pens designed to accommodate around 250–300 ewes are recommended.

Industry observations also suggest that larger pen areas can provide benefits where they:

- Reduce stocking density
- Improve animal comfort and access to feed and water

However, in containment systems, increasing pen size beyond 10 m² per ewe (except where ewes are lambing in ‘containment areas’) can increase the risk of dust issues. Larger pens are often less compacted and have lower manure and urine coverage to help stabilise the soil surface. The industry recommendation of 7–10 m² per ewe has generally proven effective in balancing pen stability, ewe movement, animal welfare, and overall health outcomes.

Further information:

- [MLA – Managing breeding ewes in containment areas](#)

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- [MLA – Confinement feeding \(drought feeding resources\)](#)
 - [Making More From Sheep – Managing sheep in droughtlots](#)
 - [AWI/industry guidance – containment pen design and stocking density](#)
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If you have any questions, please feel free to email pds@mia.com.au and we will work with the team to assist with your enquiry.