



Assessing the Economic Benefits of Confinement Feeding

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Summary

Commencing in November 2021, this project is centred around peer-to-peer learning between a group of ten core producers who are all interested in confinement feeding sheep. Six of these core producers will be site hosts, having data collected on their systems. Project learnings will be shared with SCF members and the wider farming community via articles, case studies and video summaries.

Background

Confinement feeding is a sheep management strategy that is gaining a lot of traction and interest. It involves confining sheep to sacrificial paddocks or purpose built pens, to protect paddocks from over-grazing in late summer/autumn and reduce the time spent supplementary feeding stock. Although the theory may be similar to that used for feedlotting, it differs in that all classes of sheep may be confined, with the purpose being to maintain animal weights, not increase them. Containing sheep to a smaller area or at an increased stocking rate in sacrificial paddocks, reduces the energy expended in travelling to find food or water. Essential roughage is supplied either ad lib in the pens or in a mixed feed ration, along with access to good quality water. Deferred pastures have a reduced grazing pressure, amassing a greater biomass from early rains and setting them up for improved carrying capacity and value throughout the season.

Costs involved with transitioning to a confinement feeding system are highly variable. There are many different forms of confinement feeding, from large mobs in large sacrificial paddocks, through to purpose-built pens for mid-sized mobs. Feed may be fed straight on to the ground, in troughs or in raised troughs mounted on posts. Feed can be anything from a full mixed ration made in a tub grinder down to a simple single grain ration with ad lib hay or straw bales fed in the pen. Fencing and feed system costs may also come with a requirement for new or additional equipment to suit the system and additional animal health treatments. Given the tremendous variability between farms, it is hard to quantify the economics of confinement feeding systems as a whole, therefore this project will focus on the feed aspect only.

Methodology

This two-year project is a Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) sponsored by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) and the MLA Donor Company. It will see the core group sharing their thoughts and experiences, discussing different setups, hearing from industry experts, and creating a network of support for peer-to-peer learning amongst each other. These core producers farm from Gairdner to Frankland River, with a great range of confinement setups between them. In each year, three of the group members will be site hosts, with findings from their property contributing to the collective learning. Feed samples will be tested from the grain, hay and straw they plan to feed in confinement, with these results being used to formulate a balanced ration suitable for the class and pregnancy status of the sheep. Ewes will be condition scored on entry to confinement as well as when exiting, with target condition scores set and expected to be achieved with the balanced ration. Pasture cuts will be taken to demonstrate the extra pasture growth achieved by deferring grazing through confinement of animals past the season break. These figures will then formulate the economic analysis component of the project, putting a figure on the cost and value of confinement feeding. The group will meet at least twice annually and communicate regularly to share their experiences.

Going Forward

The first workshop for the project was held in March 2022, with producers getting to meet each other, share their experiences and hear from industry experts about animal health, nutrition, and site selection considerations. A video will also be produced to capture and summarise a site visit, along with a summary video and written case study on one of the demonstrated confinement feeding systems at the end of the project.



This Producer Demonstration Site is funded by Meat & Livestock Australia