

STOCK CONTAINMENT AREAS

May 2018

CASE STUDY – LACHLAN RALTON, WOODSTOCK WEST

Lachlan Ralton farms in partnership with his brother, Chris, and his uncle, Howard, at Woodstock West, in central Victoria. The sheep and cropping farm is 1500 hectares (ha), with 600 ha sown to cereal crops each year.

2,000 breeding ewes graze primarily on lucerne pasture. Half the ewes are joined to Merino rams and half to White Suffolk rams, producing both meat and wool.

“During the Millennium Drought we managed by destocking our older ewes. It was certainly easier for us, with good prices for stock, than it was for farmers who were forced to destock in the 1982 drought when sheep were not worth much at all. We did not have containment areas during the Millennium Drought, we just locked the sheep up in small sacrifice paddocks,” Lachlan said.

A big shift in risk management has occurred since then. “We had been thinking about building a stock containment area (SCA) for the last few years, but we only purchased this property (‘Gourdie Farm’) three years ago and we were looking for the most suitable site.

“The government funding for containment areas was certainly an incentive. We had piped underground water from a bore two kilometres away and laid the pipe in the track going to the house. We were using the site next to the track as a ram paddock and I had a ‘lightbulb moment’ and realised that with water going past, this was probably the place to build the stock containment area. We dug the pipe in and left risers for the troughs,” Lachlan said.

SITING AND SHADE

Lachlan researched the guidelines thoroughly but worked flexibly. He selected a site with a moderate slope and stable soil (red clay loam) and ironstone gravel for extra stability. Nutrient run off is captured in the cropping paddock below the yards.

Protecting mature trees from ringbarking was important in considering the site, as was a reliable and clean water supply.

“The literature suggests that the water troughs should be located at the bottom of the yards. We sited the troughs at

Farm information

Producer: Lachlan Ralton, Chris Ralton & Howard Hepburn

Location: ‘Myrtleford’, Woodstock West



Property size: 1500 ha

Annual Rainfall: 480 mm (long term average), average of 350 mm over 2013-2015

Soils: Clay loams

Enterprises: Cereal crops 600 ha; self-replacing Merino ewe flock and White Suffolk first cross prime lambs.



Photo: Lachlan Ralton

the top of the yards near the pipeline, but I am happy to move them in the future if things get too wet.”

Lachlan also notes that the laneway should be at the top of the stock containment area, and theirs is at the bottom. “I don’t really know how wet the laneway might get, but I don’t expect it to be a problem.”

“The yards are about 50 metres by 50 metres and we have

not had more than 200 sheep in any one yard at a time. We find that two self-feeders and a bale of hay will keep that many sheep happy.”

“Trees on the northern edge provide fantastic shade all day for the sheep. On hot days the sheep are all camped next to the fence in the shade of the big old trees. I thought the shade was really important to provide.”

When selecting the site for the yards, Lachlan also considered proximity to other facilities. “Whether I am dipping or crutching, there is a big benefit in having the sheep in a containment area close to your main facilities.”

The yards were also located so that the animals could be checked regularly and easily.

FEEDING

Already having one tonne capacity self-feeders on hand, Lachlan placed them in the yards adjacent to the access laneway.

“We use a Bromar feeder to fill the troughs from the laneway without having to enter the yards.” This is a good time saver and a safer option for the sheep during containment.

“We put hay in the yards either by entering the yards or putting it over the fence. The sheep are very content in containment. They have shade, water and food on call. They settle down very quickly. We find stock in containment areas are much easier to manage. They are not walking around looking for feed when it is sparse – so in containment they save energy and it is easier to maintain their weight.”

BENEFITS

Having sheep in containment means that soil erosion has been minimised across the rest of the farm.

“I can see the benefit of containment areas in dry times. The yards provide great flexibility in management. You can lock up the sheep and protect your ground cover. Having grain, hay and water makes it easy to manage and keep an eye on them. I also don't have to drive all over the farm to get feed to the sheep, which can be spread out over a large area.”

As a flexible management tool, Lachlan plans to experiment. “I will certainly use the yards in future, particularly over Summer when there is not much paddock feed around. I plan to use the yards more and run more sheep.”



Photo: Water trough in the SCA.



Photo: sheep in the SCA

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information or to obtain a copy of the relevant Drought Feeding Guide visit www.agriculture.vic.gov.au/drought, contact your local Agriculture Victoria Extension Officer or call the Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

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