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Containment feeding maintains flock productivity in tough times for central west producer

Producer: Boyd Webb, 'Weewondilla', Longreach

Land size: Boyd, his wife Katie and three children—Phoebe, Topsy and Tilly—run Weewondilla, which spans almost 35,000 hectares (ha) north of Longreach.

Enterprise type: Boyd's parents bought Weewondilla in 1973. Today, it is primarily a Merino wool-growing enterprise with a flock of about 12,000. It also runs some cattle and goats.

"I like my sheep and I think they're well suited to the country that we live in," Boyd said.

"With the exception of probably the last one or two years, sheep as a whole have been outperforming beef cattle for the past 10 to 12 years when all factors are considered."



Boyd said the central west region—encompassing Weewondilla and stretching east to Barcaldine, south to Blackall and Jundah, north to Hughenden, Richmond and Julia Creek, and west to Boulia—was primarily wool-growing country until the mid-1990s.

"From 2009 to 2012, we built our cattle numbers up quite considerably and were still running around 12,000 ewes, but were just getting absolutely smashed by dogs," Boyd said.

"I think we were sitting on about 28% mortality and getting a lambing of about 26%. We tried baiting and trapping in areas where we knew there were dogs, but it got to the stage where you could see the dog tracks walking past the bait. So we started building exclusion fencing and looking for ways to protect our lambs from dogs."

In 2020, before exclusion fencing, Boyd locked up 112 ewes scanned with twins and fed them for 3 months in the yards. Ninety of the same mob were kept in a small holding paddock less than 100m away and fed the same as the sheep in the yards. There was an 84% difference in lambing percentage between the yards and the paddock. This trial helped convince Boyd that wild dogs had a major impact on lamb survival and that ewes could be containment fed and lamb in pens.

Containment feeding

When the Webbs started installing the exclusion fence, they also took the first steps towards containment feeding, buying a dedicated feed truck. Using this feed truck and purchased feed



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supplemented the nutrition needs not being delivered from the large amount of dry natural grass on the property.

Boyd said he attended 'BredWell FedWell' days run by Leading Sheep in 2012 and learnt more about the benefits and impact of good nutrition.

When the drought started impacting their business in 2014 and 2015, the Webbs ramped up feeding activities and increased their investment in feeding machinery.

"It's a game changer but it costs a lot of money, when you are under the pump in the drought it is not the best time to get into it," Boyd said.

"You can only shovel money out the door so quickly—and a truck just supersized it—but there are massive efficiencies there when looking after large numbers of sheep.

"It was costing money but kept us in production. We'd feed for six weeks, then it would rain and the pressure would be off, so instead of selling, we were able to hang on, which meant we were picking back up a lot quicker the next year around."

The price of sheep has risen considerably over the last 8 to 10 years. Boyd said sheep were now at a level where feeding was a definite option: something that may not have been possible in the past.

"There are only two feed trucks like ours in the central west which I am aware of. The first time I looked at it, I thought 'that's a waste of money'. Then I came home and started doing a few numbers on it and thought 'that's actually pretty smart'."

Though feeding in paddocks had helped with animal survival, Boyd's flock still had to walk to the feeders or trailed out feed.

The Webbs started using specially built pens in 2020 and now have 16 of various sizes.

"There are four pens that we built for lambing in—probably about 100 metres wide and up to 500 metres long, with shade in them and their own water trough," Boyd said.

"This wasn't a perfect scenario, but it was better than what was happening in the paddock."

As the Webbs began lamb marking that year, a grasshopper plague hit, stripping the nutritional value from the standing natural grass.

"It was like a bushfire: one week we had feed and 2 weeks later we had none," Boyd said.

"You have time going into a drought to plan and act. The grasshoppers were nearly instant. While the lambs had been struggling, they were still looking okay: but when the grasshoppers hit they crashed very quickly. I had 12 to 14kg lambs falling in a heap. I could not move them, so we started building more pens."

By the end of lambing that year, the Webbs had about 2200 weaners and 4200 ewes on feed and used trial and error to develop a feed mix that suited young sheep.



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“This was a massive learning process—we had to figure out the amount and sort of feed and when it was best provided—but the result was worth it,” Boyd said.

“They were in for around five months. We kept the ewe portion and sold the wethers for about \$120. From memory it cost \$50 to \$60 a head across the board: not a cheap result, but it saved the situation.”

Boyd said his family was not prepared and the timing was terrible as eastern Australia was in the grips of a large-scale drought which increased the cost of feed.

Containment feeding made economic sense, he said.

“Every time you sell, you sit out of production and generally you don’t buy back what you sold. So you missed time growing wool, joining and lambing. Yes, it is a cost: not to be in the game is a cost as well.

“There's no way you would feed sheep valued in the market at \$40 per head and it’s borderline doing it at \$60. But at \$120, \$150 and \$160 per head, if you're not feeding them or looking after them, you've got rocks in your head.”

Throughout the ongoing dry conditions, feeding in the paddocks followed by containment feeding has paid off successfully by maintaining production for the Webbs. Other options like agistment are sound options as well: remember not every drought is the same.

“I don't call them feedlots because they are not: they’re containment pens,” Boyd said.

“We can put the lambs in there, feed them up a bit and get them going. If the season changes and we can put them out in the paddocks, we will.”

Lessons learnt

Containment feeding helped the Webbs avoid selling stock during drought and restocking when the seasons improved.

“A lot of people sold but I took the view that if I sold, where was I going to buy 8000 ewes?” Boyd said.

“From a business point of view, if we sell stock, usually it's at the time everyone else is selling, and we are buying when everyone else is. There are not enough good ewes to choose from these days.”

The Webbs have fine-tuned their containment feeding systems over time, with many lessons learnt along the way. Boyd said a key learning was to be prepared. Even though his family is better prepared than many now, there’s always more that can be done.

“The biggest problem is that we don't prepare enough for droughts,” Boyd said.



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“Buying feed at scale doesn’t come cheap in western Queensland, where there are no nearby farms producing high-quality feeds. This means transport costs also must be accounted for, which comes at a cost of around \$150 a tonne delivered, and feeds like fava beans costing up to \$750 per tonne delivered in dry times.”

To help reduce that future cost, the Webbs are trialling growing forage crops, which they hope to put to silage and store on-farm. They are also looking to secure access to feeds at optimum prices.

“We’re trying to keep animals in a good productive condition and saleable, whilst looking after our pastures as best we can,” Boyd said.

Conclusion and key points

- Be prepared: get set up in the good seasons when.
- You have time to source equipment and can more easily afford it
- You won’t have time to do much when it is getting dry and you want to start feeding.
- Your situation will vary from drought to drought and from year to year.
- Don’t focus on one type of feeding: what is cheap now may not be cheap next month
- Store what will last and buy it when it is cheap.

“If it does not improve then we’ll have freed up three or four paddocks, spread the ewes in those paddocks and in three or four months’ time those wether lambs will be gone. And then we say: Well, where are we at now with the rest of them?”

Boyd says the value of sheep and cost of land means his family must adapt and do the best with what they have.

“If we don’t keep looking at the problem and trying to work out a better option, we never will work it out.

“The old saying ‘we’ll see what’s left at the end of the drought’ and you could lose 3000 or 4000 sheep, which then takes four or five years to build your flock numbers back again. Then, you get two good years and you’re back in a drought.

“We also need to manage our pastures as they will determine how well we come out of a drought and move forward.

“We’ve got to be ready for two or three years of drought, so when the seasons turn, we’re firing on all cylinders.”

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