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V-Express speeds up sheep handling for Mungindi wool producer

- Ranald and Noela Warby run 2000 Dohne sheep on their 4000ha property, Barrakee, on the Queensland/New South Wales border at Mungindi.
- They generally turn off prime lambs, but recent dry seasons have seen them sell stores into local and interstate feedlots.
- They introduced a V-Express handler to reduce handling, labour requirements and the physicality of regular sheep handling jobs.

Background

Dohne prime lamb producer Ranald Warby is quick to acknowledge the benefits of his Arrow V-Express machine after just five months of use, particularly the fact that it allows him to perform a number of tasks on his sheep in just one pass.

Gone, too, are the days of fighting rams in a race when drenching and the usual tired back after a day of crutching lambs.

“In one afternoon I crutched, vaccinated and drenched 300 ewe weaners in the V-Express with one person helping, and it wasn’t hard work at all. At the end of the day, I had three jobs accomplished,” Mr Warby said.

“With the sheep up off the ground they’re not fighting you, and you can also tip them onto their backs quite simply and easily and work on them at bench height.”

Previously he would have crutched the sheep on the board as part of a job that would have included his entire 2000 head flock, with the contract help of two or three crutchers and a rouseabout.



The V-Express is a portable sheep handler that features hydraulic belts on either side that move the sheep along in single file, enabling the producer or contractor to mouth, drench, vaccinate, tag and backline before tipping them on their backs to crutch, scan or trim their feet.





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Mr Warby bought his machine earlier this year and set it to one side of an undercover drafting pen, ensuring that sheep flow smoothly through the drafting race and up a low 50cm ramp into the V-Express, which measures approximately 90cm wide and 3m long.

It was his experience with a Harrington sheep handler many years ago that encouraged him to purchase the V-Express.

“A Harrington sales rep wanted a place to park his machine while he visited some clients so he left it here. I drenched 5000 ewes with it and found it to be very useful,” Mr Warby said.

How does it works?

Over the past three years he has employed contractors with VE machines to pregnancy scan his ewes, because the contractor said he found it more efficient to have the ewes on their backs for scanning.

“The V-Express made that easy,” Mr Warby explained.

“As the ewes are coming along between the two belts, you place your hand on their chest and tip them over onto their backs without a struggle as the belts move them forward.”

The V-Express is operated by a foot controller, which sends it forward or into reverse, and while it makes it easy to control the flow of sheep, Mr Warby wonders whether a hand toggle would be better.

The conveyor belts make a V shape that can be narrowed to contain shorn sheep or widened for woolly sheep, and the user has full control over the forwards and backwards motion.

“There are also hock restraints for crutching and when you’re finished, you just reverse the belts slightly so the restraints release and the sheep are free to go,” Mr Warby explained.

The machine is driven by a quiet hydraulic motor available in both electric and petrol versions and on 6 metre hoses, so it can be placed well away from the working area.

Calculating the benefits

While he says it’s difficult to quantify how much money or how many hours of work the V-Express has saved, Mr Warby sees the machine’s major benefit as enabling him to perform a multitude of tasks on a sheep at one time with minimum physical effort.





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The reduced handling is a plus for both producer and flock in terms of time management and stress on the sheep.

He says it's not accurate to estimate the cost of the V-Express versus hiring in contractors, because with the latter he would run through his entire mob of 2000 head and cost/per head rates come back the more stock numbers handled. In contrast the V-Express allows producers to tackle jobs with smaller mobs.

"The benefit is in the reduced physical effort on the bloke doing the job and the reduced stress on the sheep from using the conveyor belt, which are hard to quantify in dollar figures."

He says one benefit of the V-Express is the ability to do several jobs at once (time saved) but he needs another person to keep the sheep coming through to him. If he drenched or tagged or crutched a small mob without using the machine, he could do that by himself.

Last year he and his brother brought in the Dohne rams to pare their feet in the old way, by tipping them onto their backsides. It was a tough job, and this summer Mr Warby is looking forward to putting the rams through the V-Express.

"These rams weigh up to 130kg fully grown, but when they're in the belts they don't fight at all, and once you tip them over you can widen the V so they lay further down," he explained.

"They are at bench height and we can tag, crutch, drench and put a backline over their heads to prevent flystrike, all in one go."



Future plans

Mr Warby maintains a keen interest in innovation and productivity through regularly attending Leading Sheep Queensland field days and seminars up to 150km away, in the Dirranbandi-St George-Surat area of the state's southwest.

"Leading Sheep Queensland offers practical advice, knowledgeable speakers and good demonstrations, and it's good to get out and meet up with other producers and have time off the farm while still gaining knowledge," he said.



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He and his wife Noela run 2000 purebred Dohne ewes on their 4000-hectare property 'Barrakee', at Mungindi.

Mr Warby initially introduced Dohne rams from Roseville Park, Dubbo to his Merino flock 12 years ago, with the aim of turning off prime lambs and maintaining an average of 19-20 micron wool.

The flock has been pure Dohne for the past seven years and he has now introduced rams from the Pye family's Calga stud at Coonamble.

The past few seasons have been too dry to turn off prime lambs, but for the past couple of years the Warbys have sold store lambs to a feedlot at Murray Bridge, South Australia. This year's lambs were sold as stores to a local feedlot.

For the Warbys, the V-Express is another welcome advancement in a lifetime of running sheep.

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