

Drought feeding to minimise ewe and lamb losses

- A drought feeding program minimised breeding ewe losses and achieved a 75 per cent lambing rate in extremely dry conditions.
- 900 ewes were fed for five months, lambs were fed for two months after weaning.
- Zero loss of early weaned and fed lambs.

Background

Jeffery and Tricia Agar run sheep and cattle on the 35,000-hectare property 'Barbara Plains', west of Wyandra in South West Queensland.

In 2013, the Agars were running 900 pregnant and lambing ewes in extreme drought conditions, and were starting to suffer stock losses. They attended a Leading Sheep workshop in Cunnamulla presented by nutrition expert Dr John Milton – "Nutritional management for Merinos for optimum reproduction". As a result they commenced an effective drought feeding program to minimise ewe losses, and boost reproduction and lamb survival.

Prior to the 2013 drought, the Agars had not had to feed sheep, other than dry licks. Like many others, they had never been hit so hard by drought.

After attending the Leading Sheep workshop, they rang John Milton privately and spoke to him about their situation and what they could do.



Jeffery and Tricia Agar feeding on 'Barbara Plains'.

"If we had not started feeding, I believe we would have lost half the ewes and ended up with 10 per cent lambing. Because of the feeding, we saved almost all the breeding ewes and got 75 per cent lambing which is a very good result, given the conditions," Tricia Agar said.

"Without John's advice we would have made a lot of mistakes, cost ourselves a lot of money and lost a lot more sheep," she said.

Rations

The Agars consulted with John Milton about the ration for the ewes and lambs. The ration formulated was corn, mixed with two per cent ag lime and fed out on a bed of lucerne hay.

Following John Milton's advice, the ration for the 900 ewes was fed out along a bore drain in the paddock for ease of access and to avoid crowding. Mr Milton also recommended feeding a dry lick and providing access to roughage hay (barely, oaten or straw).

The lick was selected based on whatever was available at the time, and John made suggestions as to what to add to it so that it met nutritional requirements and prevented gorging.

There was no other research undertaken or special equipment purchased.

Lambs

The 650 lambs were weaned one to two months earlier than normal (at about 4-5 months of age). They spent three days in yards and were then allowed to move into smaller holding paddocks. They were fed for two months on the same ration as the ewes, as they were already accustomed to it (lucerne hay, corn, ag lime and dry lick). They also had access to roughage hay.



Jeffery Agar feeding ewes and lambs.

There was no trial and error in getting lambs onto feed as they were fed with the ewes in the paddock before being weaned, and on a similar ration.

They were watered via a small drain graded into the yard, as they were used to drinking from a drain in the paddock.

They were vaccinated with 5 in 1, mainly for the pulpy kidney issues associated with grain feeding.

Was it good for business?

The Agars lost about 20 ewes (2-3 per cent of the flock) before the feeding program commenced. Other producers in the area who were not feeding lost significant numbers of stock at this time.

"The main benefit of feeding is that we still have a breeding flock to continue on with. We didn't lose many ewes and the lambs that were fed are doing very well," said Mr Agar.

"Ewes at the time we were feeding them were valued at \$50/head, but are now valued at around \$100/head to replace," he said.

Costs

The feeding program was costly and time consuming, but minimised losses.

The estimated cost of feeding ewes was \$100/head over a period of five months.

The lambs were fed for a further two months after weaning, at a cost of \$50/head.

“It took around three and a half to five hours a day to feed out to the ewes for five months. For the lambs, we took around an hour to an hour and a half each day to feed out for the two months.

“If we did this again, we would be more organised from the start. We need to purchase silos so we can buy and store corn when it’s cheap. We also need to buy hay early and store it. A self-loading cement mixer would be useful to mix the ag lime and corn,” Mr Agar said.



Ewes and lambs feeding.

Conclusion

Mr Agar said the feeding program increased his knowledge of drought feeding and provided a very good contact for advice in John Milton.

“We would do it again to save the ewes but you need to be organised and able to source the necessary feed,” Mr Agar said.

“We only made this change as a result of the drought, but it has made us more aware of nutrition for the ewes, looking after lambing paddocks and making sure the ewes get the paddocks with most feed.”

Top tips:

- Be organised - in an ideal world you would buy feed when cheap and have silos filled with grain and a hay shed full of hay ready for the next drought.
- Recognise when to start feeding and have the elements in place so you can start when you need to. It’s important to start feeding before the sheep are under too much nutritional stress.
- The cost of feeding is huge and you need to plan and budget for this.

Further information

For more information on drought planning, management and recovery for sheep producers please visit: <https://www.wool.com/on-farm-research-and-development/sheep-health-welfare-and-productivity/sheep-nutrition/awi-drought-resources/>