**Queensland Government**

**Department of Agriculture and Fisheries**

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**Wild dog fencing and new technology create most positive outlook for wool industry ‘in a decade’**

WESTERN Queensland sheep and wool producer Jim King believes the erection of exclusion fences to reduce wild dog pressure is one of the most positive moves his industry has seen in more than a decade.

The Longreach property owner said the fences had given the sector a much-needed shot of confidence, prompting some producers to return to sheep and ensuring the future security of others.

“Exclusion fencing has changed the long-term outlook for western sheep and wool enterprises, it means many producers can now focus on improving productivity and profitability without the anxiety and financial impact of stock losses to wild dogs,” he explained.

Being optimistic about his industry’s future and wanting to play a role helping producers make gains at grassroots’ level has been the catalyst for Mr King’s involvement with Leading Sheep, a proactive network of Queensland sheep and wool businesses.

The network is committed to equipping progressive producers with knowledge, skills and the latest technology to increase productivity and profitability.

Initially a member of one of the three regional Leading Sheep co-ordinating committees, Mr King is now a producer representative on the network’s 10-member state advisory panel. The panel helps identify industry and producer priorities and opportunities for extension and information-sharing geared towards on-farm gains.

“Personally, we haven’t been significantly affected by wild dogs, but like anything that is good for the overall industry, this exclusion fencing will have positive implications for family-run sheep and wool operations like ours.”

Mr King and his wife Lou, run Willowen, an 8500 hectare (21,000 acre) grazing property south of Longreach. They bought the property in 1988 as a Merino sheep and wool enterprise, before adding cattle to the mix to spread their risk.

Today they run 1200 merino ewes, along with 800 lambs and 150 cattle in an operation that during a regular season is geared to be 70 per cent sheep and 30 per cent beef.

“We haven’t had decent summer rain since 2013, instead the breaks have come from storms and as a result we’ve had some pretty ordinary seasons, which in turn has meant we’ve had to reduce stock numbers,” Mr King said.

“Through it all we kept a nucleus of 900 quality ewes which were easy care sheep that produced more wool and didn’t need mulesing.”

Mr King believes improving flock genetics is an effective way to lift production without having to increase property size or make significant changes to pasture management.

“We have found investing in better genetics, for example selecting rams based on Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) with a focus on eye muscle depth and fat scores have allowed us to keep our wool production and reproduction moving in the right direction regardless of the season. At classing time, each ewe is weighed and condition scored and adding this to traditional classing takes the guess work out and helps improve outcomes.

“I think with visual assessment alone producers generally get it right 80 per cent of the time, but when you introduce some tangible figures to complement it, you are getting it right 90 to 95 per cent of the time in terms of what you keep and what you cull.

“So as producers it is important we continue to embrace new technology and use it to complement our experience and knowledge.”

He also believes one of Leading Sheep’s greatest assets is the organised industry forums and workshops, which encourage producers to share their challenges and compare solutions.

“I am a pretty quiet sort of bloke, but I think there is enormous value in sharing knowledge, experience and ideas. For me, the Leading Sheep forums offer a place to share challenges and ask for advice and constructive criticism, it often serves to reassure you that you aren’t alone in battling a particular problem.

“I’ve become more involved in Leading Sheep now, because I have enormous confidence in the future of the sheep and wool sector and I want to play a part in ensuring western Queensland producers are well represented.

“For example, I’d like to see some research trials happening in our part of the world, so we could validate data that is being generated further south and localise it to fit our environment.”

High on his priority list is the generation of western-Queensland data on the most effective joining and lambing times.

“Often, we rely on anecdotal data or we stick with tradition, but I would really love to see some good, trial work happening here so we had ‘real’ evidence that could in turn help us lift crucial production elements, like lambing rates.

“But it is about being involved and being aware of what the issues are for others in our industry, and being prepared to consider developments in things like, technology and genetics, and weighing up how they might help us lift our profitability, productivity and competitiveness.”

Leading Sheep is a joint initiative of Australian Wool Innovation and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland, supported by AgForce. It is a proactive network of Queensland sheep and wool businesses at the forefront of practical and relevant information and technology, to equip progressive and thriving producers for the future.

For more information about Leading Sheep visit [www.leadingsheep.com.au](http://www.leadingsheep.com.au) or like the Leading Sheep Facebook page.

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