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Planning for productivity in a new shearing shed build

Planning and building a new shearing shed requires a significant capital outlay and years of planning, so it's critical that the facilities are designed to maximise productivity and efficiency of the shearing process, and will continue to drive benefits to the enterprise for years to come.

Since 1986, graziers Andrew and Heather Turnbull have owned and operated Narada Grazing Co, a 7,486-hectare (18,500 acre) property south of Tambo, in south west Queensland.

To enhance productivity, efficiency, and storage on-farm, they made the decision to design and build a new dual-purpose shearing and storage shed, engaging local contractor, Jay Dunn, for the job.

With no background in building shearing sheds, Mr Dunn decided to attend the Leading Sheep 'Shearing Shed Workshop' in Longreach in December 2019. The workshop provided Mr Dunn and Mr Turnbull insights and tips from producers and industry professionals on how to build and run a profitable shed.

"The workshop was very informative. There were a number of presentations from producers as well as building and shearing contractors. It gave me the opportunity to get advice and insights direct from industry professionals on building an effective, operational and safe shearing shed," Mr Turnbull said.

"Although I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted in my head, there were some great tips that came through the presentations showing how we can make the most out of the space and maximise productivity during the shearing process.

"Engaging in the conversations and seeing sheds with a similar design to the one we had in mind, was extremely beneficial, even for simply clarifying the planning process and reinforcing that we were on the right track.

"Building a new shed requires a significant capital outlay, but our business was in the right place and we were able to justify its year-round use by making it dual-purpose with shearing and storage."

Through the key learnings and takeaways, Mr Turnbull was able to modify the plans before construction to make minor, but important changes to the construction process, layout, and fit out.

"Before the workshop, we hadn't given much thought to whether we'd use hardwood or steel bearers in the pen area. After a simple comment was made about the rust potential in steel—particularly around sheep urine—for longevity's sake we realised that hardwood was the superior option," he said.

"Though steel would have been a cheaper option for the initial outlay, it wouldn't have been in the long run when you have to look at replacing them more frequently."

"Following the workshop, we also decided to forego hardwood floors for the new to market, plastic grating.

"After a while the hardwood will break, and although that could be 10 years down the track, if they're not repaired or noticed immediately, there's a high risk of breaking legs. There's also significant weight bearing costs associated with putting them in.

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“But with the new plastic matting, there is no weight bearing concerns, and even though the grating itself is quite comparable cost-wise to hardwood, it is much cheaper and easier to upkeep – if one is broken, you just unscrew and replace it.



“The depth and non-direction flow in the plastic flooring also helps to improve movement by reducing baulking light regardless of the direction the sheep are moving.”

Another key takeaway for Mr Turnbull was assessing productivity potential across the entire shearing process, including on the wool room floor.

“We installed raised boards, positioning the wool working area directly in front. This will boost efficiency by minimising the interference between shearers and shed workers and decreasing the distance between the bench and shearing stations,” he said.

“Our classing floor is also higher than the wool pressing area, so that classers won’t need to throw fleeces up all the time.”

Workplace health and safety was a priority in planning for the new shearing shed from the outset, to mitigate risk and maximise its operational longevity.

“Following the workshop, we were able to make specific changes to the fit out and layout that will put us in good stead for safety assurance well into the future,” he said.

“Covering simple items such as safety railings, distance between shearing stations, and ensuring best placement of the emergency switches, we were able to think practically about layout and outfitting.

“We also installed raised shearing boards, bracing the safety rails from the ceiling, so there’s no obstacles impeding the shearers when working and allowing rouseabouts to sweep along the board.

“Shearing stands with all the latest safety gear were installed at each station, reducing safety risk and increasing time efficiency by ensuring that what they need is all set up on farm so shearers aren’t having to bring their own.

“I saw real value in having shearing contractors at the workshop. They were able to provide these practical tips and insights that will not only enhance safety but also productivity.”

One of the key topics discussed at the workshop was airflow style, to ensure effective ventilation in the shearing area, while also having the ability to shut out the elements if need be.

“Though we had already discussed effective ventilation with the contractor prior to the workshop, it reinforced that we were on the right track with our double doors through the middle and two in front of the board that can be opened up for effective airflow,” Mr Turnbull said.



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From lighting to power point placements, Mr Turnbull said workshop presentations were highly valuable in the planning to create a productive and effective work environment for shearing contractors.

“After hearing the benefits of installing LED lighting, we ensured that each station had individual lights on each shearing stand, and good lighting in the wool room for classing which improved light consistency,” Mr Turnbull said.

“We also ensured power points were easily accessible from each station and delivered from the roof, to improve efficiencies and mitigate safety risks by removing clutter.”

Recently completed, the end result is a 36-metre-long and 18-metre-wide dual-purpose shed, with machinery storage on one side and shearing on the other. It includes the wool room floor, board, catching pens and upstairs sheep storage area.

When building the new shearing shed, ensuring practicality and operational longevity was a top priority for Mr Turnbull.

“As we were utilising the space as multi-purpose, instead of using timber flooring, in parts we cemented separate areas of the shed for storage purposes. During the drought, we didn’t have a secure space to store fodder for example so that was an important consideration for us in planning,” he said.

“I also don’t expect that it will be too long in the future before we’re seeing shearing sheds inspected for workplace health and safety, so I wanted to ensure that all safety elements were implemented to prepare for this and reduce the risk of future significant capital outlay.

“Our two sons, who are running a block nearby, are also very interested in the land, so looking at the long-term infrastructure benefits for them was an important consideration.

“We sought to design the shed in a way that is simple and would face minimal recurring costs, and our next steps will be looking at new accommodations on farm for shearing contractors.

“We have recently got the shed up and running and look forward to testing it at full capacity at shearing time.

“In the next couple of years, we hope to restock and get back to our normal number of about 7,000 sheep, and now we’ll have the space and capabilities to facilitate that.”

AWI and WASIA’s recently developed SafeSheds, The Shearing Shed Safety Program, provides producers with a best practice guide and self-assessment checklists which can be used in both existing and new sheds. This aims to help make the wool harvesting workplace safer. For more information and to find the program, head to: www.wool.com/safe-sheds.

AWI shearing shed design project utilised a working group of shed staff from across the country to design, prototype and trial a shearing shed design that considered the flow of livestock, wool and people, safety of staff, quality wool preparation, and the welfare of animals. This looked at individual design features in a whole of shed approach. For more information and to find the design outcomes from this project, head to: www.wool.com/sheddesign.



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