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Fencing for better lambing rates

Overview

This case study showcases the on-farm value of erecting predator fencing, focusing on how it helps improve lambing rates and productivity, and drive improved environmental outcomes. This case study features Queensland wool producer, John MacMillan.

Producer: John and Maree MacMillan, Evanston Station, Ilfracombe, Queensland

Enterprise type: Predominantly Merino sheep

Land size and type: Approximately 18,000 hectares (ha) at Evanston Station and another 12,000-ha west of Longreach.

Flock size: Currently running 12,700 Merinos; at their peak pre-drought running almost 14,000.

Building predator fencing

Running a sheep station in the grip of drought in the mid-2010s, John MacMillan's story of hard times wasn't unique, and neither was the growing sense he might have to walk away from his operation.

John battled against no rain, plummeting land values, bare country and wild dogs that were ravaging his flock. He estimates he was losing roughly 1,000 grown sheep a year to predation.



"Our last decent lambing would've been 2010-11, where we did 99 per cent, but we've had wild dogs giving us trouble since the 1990s when they started to make inroads," John said.

"We had rams around the house and even they were getting attacked by dogs, so there wasn't much hope without the fence.

"We had to make a decision whether we were going to keep going, sell or fence. So, we decided to fence because land values weren't all that favourable at the time."

In March 2015, John had shorn almost 13,800 sheep. Within one month, he totally destocked to just 50 killers and 100 rams.

But it wasn't until 2016 that John, his wife Maree, and one worker, plus the kids when they were home from boarding school on school holidays, could start erecting the exclusion fence around their 18,000-ha property.



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It took seven months to run the 72km, comprising 52km in a cluster with two neighbours, and another 20km themselves. John said he also leant on the knowledge he gathered from Leading Sheep's 'Feral Fencing' bus trip near Longreach.

"I've been to a few ewe and ram management days. They were very informative with some really good speakers. Anything I've done with Leading Sheep has always been positive."

The cost of labour for fencing was high during an already tough time on the land with no cash flow and contractors charging at least \$3000 per km. While they saved almost \$250,000 in labour, the group of neighbours still had to spend \$400,000 on materials.

So, John brought their restocking ahead of schedule.

"We started buying a few wethers before we finished the fence. In February 2017, we started restocking for a bit of cash flow and then we started buying ewes in March and April that year," John said.

By now, the grass was greener, there was more water, land values rose, and John's flock was protected from predation by 1.7-metre-high exclusion fencing.

Restocking

Between now and then, it has been a steady effort to restock to the same stocking rate John ran before the drought.

"I think we were able to restock at least three years earlier than we anticipated," John said.

"Since February 2017, we've marked 21,680 lambs, and we have averaged about 95 per cent since getting back to sheep. And we were buying off the box (Auctions Plus) so we were buying a lot of unknown articles really, probably a lot of people's dry sheep."

But it hasn't all been smooth sailing. When they finished the exclusion fence, four wild dogs were closed in on the almost 18,000 hectares. Once the dogs were quickly controlled, the fence did its job and vermin are now all but a non-issue.

"We had to get the chopper in to get two of them. Since then, we've had one back in last year, but we went four-and-a-half years without anything," John said.

"There's no dogs and we got rid of all the pigs out there as well. There's no foxes really in this country so we've got no ground predators as far as lambing goes."



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The benefits

John said it is now much easier to get a good night's sleep knowing predators aren't preying on his flock under the cover of darkness.

The rewards of exclusion fencing extend far beyond keeping the 1,000 sheep a year he was losing to wild dogs. John believed there was more than one kangaroo per acre on his land.

"We've still got plenty of roos in here, but they're not like they were. They're not in plague proportion and that's what it comes down to. They were coming through in waves and cleaning up as they went," John said.

"There's a lot less maintenance on internal fencing. We were able to reduce the roo population through controlled and approved mitigation shooting.

"I do believe that sheep were getting pushed onto noxious weeds earlier because the better stuff had been eaten out by roo pressure. All of the sheep here are a lot healthier than they've ever been.

"We've got more grass and more species of grass than we've ever seen here, as well as herbage and perennials. It's pretty amazing to see the difference really. We still see the difference between inside the fence and outside where people haven't fenced.

"I could take you to any boundary and you can see the difference."

Other benefits are less visible but just as valuable.

John said he hasn't had to treat for lice since he started restocking in 2017, saving approximately \$17,000 in chemical costs each year.

"We don't get any neighbours' stock anymore, so there's no transferring of lice. You're able to run what you like to run. You can run goats or Dorpers or Merinos or whatever," he said.

"The cost is irrelevant., It just gives you control of the control. I can't make that any louder or clearer."

Learnings

When John acquired another 12,000 hectares west of Longreach last year, his first job was obvious. There was already 50km of exclusion fencing, but that was only two-thirds completed.

When he added another 22km, John didn't make the same mistakes he did on his first property.



"We were in a bit of a hurry to get it up, so we didn't put much drill stem in it apart from end assemblies and little creeks and gullies," John said.



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The fencing – made stronger from the start – has shown the same benefits on the property west of Longreach as it did at Evanston Station near Ilfracombe.

Final word

John highly recommends exclusion fencing for landholders and encourages any doubters to see firsthand the benefits not only for increased primary production but also for the environment.

“Since November, our grass has seeded three times, whereas outside the fence, I haven’t seen any seeding. I’ve definitely seen things I haven’t seen before”

It has been more than a decade since John had his ‘last decent lambing’ before the drought. While he had a rate of 99 per cent for a flock size of close to 14,000, he still had room to improve.

“We had a pretty good lambing then, but we did have a fair bit of predation though. If we had the fence, we would’ve done a lot better, I think,” John said.

He is now within a stone’s throw of returning to those levels, with ambitions of even surpassing them.

“We’re about to shear 12,700-odd. We’re nearly back up there again – it’s basically taken us five years to breed our way back there,” he said.

The difference between now and when the next drought inevitably arrives is John won’t have to worry about wild dogs.

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