

## Stock containment areas: managing the feed gap



Above: Birchip farmer David Smith. Photo: BCG.

**In June 2011, a forum was held for north west Victorian farmers which aimed to increase their knowledge and skills in livestock management, nutrition, animal health, marketing and logistics, with a particular focus on the strategic use of stock containment management practices to help prevent soil health degradation.**

David Smith, who farms with his brother Ian on a property 20 km west of Birchip, was one of four farmers who after attending the forum, successfully applied for a grant to receive one-on-one support from a livestock industry specialist to

improve his skills in productive and profitable stock containment.

Increasing lamb survival through improved management of the feed gap and good nutrition was an incentive for David to learn more about stock containment practices.

“We had trouble with the feed gap between the break and six weeks later when feed is ready to be grazed,” David said.

“As a result, it was difficult to maintain body condition on ewes prior to lambing

in May. I was looking for nutritional and animal health advice, including when to start and stop feeding.”

Over the past couple of years, the Smiths have lost a number of ewes during the feed gap period.

“First cross ewes are too expensive to lose and I hadn’t previously been confident to lock them up in containment areas,” he said.

“We are looking for ways to maintain a healthier, more prolific flock and decrease losses of ewes and lambs.”

### **Key learning**

Following the forum, David received a site visit from industry specialist, Hamish



### At a glance

**Location:** Birchip

**Livestock enterprise:** 900 first cross ewes

**Cropping mix:** Cereals, canola and pulses

**Pasture mix:** Oats, pulses and vetch

**Mean annual rainfall:** 345mm

**Soil:** Clay loam

Dickson, who provided information on how to most effectively use a stock containment area.

“During the feed gap period, we had been feeding the sheep hay and grain,” David said.

“We had plenty of feed, but have realised that we were feeding them too quickly and in a haphazard way. As a result, we lost a few ewes.”

Hamish provided advice about the appropriate increments of feed to use and how to build the quantity over three weeks.

Careful introduction to grain is critical and it was recommended to start by providing 50g per head and then increasing this amount by 50g per head until the desired target is reached.

Hay samples were tested and a feed ration was designed specifically to meet the feed needs of two classes of sheep. The ration included hay, barley and lentils, and will vary depending on liveweight, breed and pregnancy status.

“We’re now lambing later and the nutrition advice we’ve received has made us more confident to lock lambs up in a containment area,” David said.

“Previously, sheep were walking around paddocks using a lot of energy looking for food. We’d see skinny sheep and try to fatten them up. Now we’re more proactive about keeping them in good condition through the use of a containment area.”



Photo: Department Primary Industries.

With containment of stock during these low feed times, vulnerable soils can be protected from wind erosion.

#### **Next steps**

A calendar of operations was produced that recommended activity and feed throughout the year, such as when to start supplementing feed.

The calendar has enabled the development of a month-by-month feed budget so the Smiths can alter their management when needed, according to scheduled activities or feed requirements. This includes placing ewes in a containment area at the end of March when feed runs low and protecting soil from erosion.

It was also suggested that the body condition of ewes be scored before putting them in the containment area and, if possible, splitting the ewes according to

pregnancy status and condition so a more accurate ration can be formulated.

#### **Further information**

To find out more about the benefits of building a stock containment area and how to manage stock on your farm, visit the Mallee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) website at [www.malleecma.vic.gov.au](http://www.malleecma.vic.gov.au) or contact the Mallee CMA on 5051 4377 to receive a free copy of a DVD containing advice from San Jolly a leading animal nutritionist.

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