Containment feeding decision to improve ground cover and allows ease of ewe management.

LOCATION: Angaston

ANNUAL RAINFALL: 525 mm (475mm – average over the last 10 years)

FARM SIZE: 708 HA

ENTERPRISES: Wool, self – replacing ewes and wethers

SOIL TYPE: lighter sandy loams

Carlyle Holdings, Angaston are a minor site for the MLA Producer demonstration sites (PDS) containment ewe project. Fourth generation farmer Peter Mitchell commenced containment feeding to maintain ground cover and allow quicker pasture recovery in the lead up to lambing.

They run 1000 merino breeding ewes, 800 ewe hoggets and 1000 wethers across the 700-ha property.

Enterprise

The Mitchell's run Merino's, predominantly for wool production. They run a self-replacing ewe enterprise; they were retaining wethers for wool production however in the future they will be sold on as store lambs.

Containment feeding decision

Pete was interested in preserving the pasture over dry periods and improving the pasture growth for lambing ewes. He is supplementary feeding ewes in containment but hoping to reduce the need for supplementary feeding in paddocks with improved pastures as ewes are lambing and lactating. The pastures are predominately unimproved; however, a portion of the property has been sown to Phalaris and other areas are being sown to annuals with plans to continually improve pastures across the property going forward. Pete would prefer to destock some areas to allow improvement and pasture recovery over the dry times.

Water has become an issue with dams going dry over the last few seasons, where rainfall has been well below average. Water requirements have been more easily managed in containment area rather than immediately running water across the whole property.

Pete decided to become a site for the containment ewe project so they could commence containment on a small mob and determine whether it was going to be successful for them on a larger scale.

Containment area

265 ewes were contained in a 7ha sacrifice paddock – this was an ideal way for Pete to try containment without putting in new infrastructure. The ewes were scanned, and single bearing ewes were contained for just over 8 weeks from late March to mid-May where they were moved to their lambing paddocks just prior to lambing. The ewes had an ideal condition score of 3.1 going into containment and they put on weight and were at a score of 3.4 prior to lambing.

Containment ration and cost

The ewes were fed a combination of a small quantity of barley grain and old ryegrass meadow hay to meet daily energy requirements earlier in pregnancy. Later in pregnancy they were fed better quality oaten hay and over 400grams per ewe per day of barley grain to meet increased energy requirements closer to lambing. The total cost per ewe over the 8-week containment period was $11.20 or $1.40 per ewe per week. Ewes were given ad-lib access to a lime and salt lick – however they didn't consume much of this.

Lambing paddocks

The ewes were moved out of containment a week prior to lambing onto pasture. Unfortunately, due to a later than ideal break, only very short green pick was available in the lambing paddocks. Due to low pasture availability, supplementary hay and grain was available in the lambing paddock also. The ewes lambed down successfully with 99% lambs marked from the 265 single bearing ewes.

Ewe Mortality

There was only one ewe loss (0.3% of the mob) which was attributed to being a shy feeder during the containment period.

Ease of management

Pete believes that there is great benefit in preserving the existing pasture and putting ewes in a concentrated area when they require large quantities of supplementary feed. When water security is a factor, it also makes sense to keep ewes in one area over dry periods. He is confident containment will be an effective management tool for them going forward as along with maintaining pasture, he believes it resulted in stronger lambs and ewes at marking. Containment allowed them to improve their animal health management in general by having the mob close and allowed more observation while supplementary feeding. The biggest advantage for their enterprise will be the ability to destock some paddocks and allow pastures to regenerate and groundcover to be maintained over summer and autumn.

Containment made it easier for Pete to manage ewes in a dry start when large amounts of hand feeding was necessary.

A disadvantage of containment Pete can see going forward - is the increased labour cost required with a more intensive feeding regime. As he feeds more ewes – he is weighing up feeding in troughs, compared to self-feeders currently used. He has also seen extra potential health risks associated with higher stocking rates such as increased worm burdens and Campylobacter.

The future

Peter is planning to containment feed more ewes in the coming years and is currently looking at constructing a 2-pen containment area on their property. They are planning to feed using troughs to allow more accurate rations to each mob. He is not yet sure of the feeding method he prefers and is still considering the labour and equipment costs involved of varying systems. The aim is to allow their grazing country to maintain groundcover in drier years and allow pasture regeneration more quickly after a break to ensure adequate pasture for lambing.