Containment feeding to manage nutritional requirement of ewes in an accessible location.

LOCATION: 10kms East of Springton

ANNUAL RAINFALL: 400 mm annual average

FARM SIZE: 1000 HA

ENTERPRISES: WOOL AND PRIME LAMB

SOIL TYPE: Sandy loam soils

Ryan Foulis' property is located 10kms east of Springton.

Ryan was keen to bring the ewes into smaller and more accessible containment pens to provide their nutritional needs in the lead up to lambing, and allow the pasture to grow ahead of lambing.

The 1000HA property consists of unimproved native pastures and 200 HA of arable hills grazing.

Enterprise

Ryan runs Merino ewes predominantly for wool production, these are then joined to a terminal ram for production of a prime lamb. Ewe numbers were recently increased to 1400.

Containment feeding decision

Foulis' join their ewes in December and January with first lambs seen mid-May. Of the 1400 breeding ewes 800 were put into containment. The property has very large paddocks with hills grazing which can have its challenges when monitoring ewes, containment has helped with this management issue significantly. In addition to this, having the ewes off the pastures has allowed the existing ground cover in the hills to be preserved which has been invaluable over the last few dry seasons. Ryan has seen better pasture recovery post season break which allows the growth to get away before lambing. The area had experienced a couple of very dry years with below average rainfall in the lead up to the containment decision. Containment allowed the pasture to get the full benefit of the break, which came in late April and early May this season.

Containment Area

Ewes were scanned and condition scored in early March and were moved into containment 8 weeks prior to lambing. Ryan scanned 424 twin bearing ewes and 400 singles which were split across 4 containment yards, which are half an acre each. The twin bearing ewes were drafted according to condition scores of above and below 3.25. Light twins averaged 3.0 CS whilst the heavy twin ewes averaged 3.5 CS.

Ryan uses a communal raceway with a central feed trough to alternate feeding his ewes the grain portion of the ration. Over the last two seasons he has had a contractor bale high quality silage, he has moved to silage-based rations as the high grain rations were resulting in some ewe losses, possibly due to hypocalcaemia.

Containment ration and cost

Ryan's containment ration consisted of high-quality barley and ryegrass silage. Twins had an average of 2.21kg per day while singles had around 2kg per day. Twin bearing ewes were given a small amount of barley in late gestation as they required some less fibrous more energy dense feed. Ewes had access to a high magnesium and calcium loose lick for the duration of containment. The total ration cost was between 20 and 22 cents per ewes per day this season.

Ryan Foulis at his Springton property.

Lambing paddocks

The lighter twin ewes were given the three more sheltered paddocks for lambing, which ranged from 35HA to 150HA. Twin ewes continued to have access to silage and 300g of barley per day in the first 3 to 4 weeks after release from containment. Ryan recorded 140% lambing in the twin mob and 95% with the single bearing ewes at marking.

Ewe deaths

Ryan reported some ewe losses due to grain consumption complications and for this reason he has moved across to a more sileage based ration seeing almost no losses in the containment pens after making this change. Ewe mortality over lambing was also much lower with the change in ration at around 2% over the lambing period.

Ease of management

Containment enables Ryan to keep a closer eye on ewes in late pregnancy and monitor condition of ewes more easily. He acknowledged that ewes in containment is more labour intensive however he believes that the increased labour is far outweighed by the benefits of being able to closely monitor the ewes. Ryan was able to maintain ewes at condition score targets by making adjustments to the ration and providing their exact requirements when required. Ryan also thought that the costs of the basic initial infrastructure was relatively minimal in relation to the benefits.

The Future

Foulis' are looking to improve their containment yards with the addition of purpose-built shelter and shade provisions. They plan to continue with the same numbers of ewes in containment on a silage-based ration which he believes provides a great advantage as opposed to grain. Potentially they will look into building more containment yards to accommodate more ewes in the future with intention of also making use of this infrastructure in summer. Ryan says "I'd encourage anyone to look at containment feeding for the advantages of protecting pastures, ration accuracy, ease of management and monitoring condition scores"