

# To Confinement Feed or Not

## Producer Case Study - Charles Wass



Confinement feeding is where livestock are held in a confined area and supplied feed and water. It is used for a 4-week period to defer grazing of paddocks after the break of the season rains. If the sheep are confined for a longer period, it then becomes more of a drought feeding or fed lotting situation.

The use of confinement feeding is on the rise in WA and there is strong interest and hype surrounding the topic, with producers interested in learning more and adopting the practice. There is, however, concern about the lack of expertise in implementing the systems. Confinement feeding has many variables, such as using set pens or small paddocks, feeding out on the ground or in a trough, stocking rates and pen sizes, health management and vaccine programs, and the overall aim of confining.

A Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) project is funded by Meat & Livestock Australia and is managed by AgPro Management commenced in 2022. The PDS 'Which set up? Implementing confinement feeding' aims to address these issues and help producers identify WHY they are wanting to confinement feed, and WHEN it should be implemented.

### Confinement feeding process

Charles Wass is based in Coorow, WA where he runs a mixed cropping and sheep farm, alongside his wife Shayne. The property is based 10kms west of Coorow and is 1,800ha arable, with 600ha of good quality yellow sand used for cropping and 1,200ha of poor-quality yellow sand for pasture. They receive an average growing season rainfall (GSR) of 300mm, with the break of the season around 20th May. They run 1,800 Dohne merino ewes, of which 1,200 are commercial ewes and 400 are stud ewes. Charles outlined he wanted to be part of the project as "I can see the advantage of getting sheep off of the paddock at the break of the season, but it is quite tricky, so being able to get it right is very important."

On 2nd May 2022, 300 Dohne merino ewes were placed into confinement after being condition scored (50 selected at random). "They were also given an annual ewe guard injection" which is a 6 in 1 and is suggested to be used prior to confinement feeding. The ewes were in confinement pens for 4 weeks and removed on the 31st May 2022. A second condition score was taken on the mob once they finished in confinement, Charles said "the sheep went in and came out at a similar condition score." During the 4-week period the feed ration included at lib hay/straw, topped up every 3 days and trail feed 1kg/hd of lupins every 2 or 3 days.

Prior to the project, the Wass family had already built and were using a confinement pen system, consisting of 4 pens, at 65m x 30m in size. The setup of the pens consists of "a few trees and a large cement water trough in each pen, which is then fed by 1.5inch gravity fed water." The original feeding system consisted of feeders and at lib hay/straw. The pen location was specifically chosen on a free draining soil that doesn't blow and is on a slight slope with the water trough at the bottom end. Charles said, "the chosen site is also down the laneway from the house and sheds for easy access."

In the lead up to confinement feeding the property received 84mm of rain in the Feb to May period. This meant there was early season feed available in the stubble paddocks. As a delaying feed tactic in these years Charles said, "we use the paddocks we are going to put into crop as our holding paddocks and keep the sheep off of our pasture paddocks, then as we seed the last paddock the sheep are put into the rested pasture paddocks." If the Wass family hadn't taken part in the project this year, then the confinement feeding pens wouldn't have been used.

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### Issues and changes in the future

Charles said that “the biggest issue we’ve faced is the feeding of the sheep in confinement, it has always been the issue that we’ve struggled with.” In previous years the Wass family have lost sheep using the feeders with lupins and open access to hay/straw. The current feeding system they use is “to trail feed lupins in the empty pen next to it and move sheep in and out at feeding whilst also having at lib hay/straw.” This seems to have worked the best, as it prevents the sheep chasing after the trail feeder whilst feeding out. It is however “more labour intensive than initially planned on and isn’t as efficient, as you get loss on the ground.”

Charles outlined that one change he would make would be “to set the pens up so they were long and skinny, so that I could have a feed trough at one end to feed into.” This would increase labour efficiency in comparison to their current process. The Wass family will continue using confinement feeding as another management tool in their sheep enterprise. Charles said, “hopefully it means I can seed earlier, as we are sometimes holding off seeding as we have sheep on stubbles.” This is something they hope to learn more about throughout the project.