Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Future Drought Fund

SA DROUGHT HUB

This program received funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund



Containment feeding to boost business performance and resilience

LEAD ORGANISATION: Adelaide University

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS AND FARMING SYSTEMS GROUPS INVOLVED: Talking Livestock, Livestock SA, Mackillop Farm Management Group (MFMG), Agriculture Kangaroo Island, Upper North Farming Systems, Barossa Improved Grazing Group (BIGG), Agricultural Innovation & Research Eyre Peninsula

SA DROUGHT HUB NODES: Minnipa, Orroroo, Roseworthy, Struan

This project was supported through additional funding from the SA Sheep Industry Fund

Outcomes

Short term

- Increased collaboration and partnerships among organisations working in research, development, extension, adoption and commercialisation (RDEA&C)
- Co-design and participatory approaches embedded in the design and delivery of hub activities
- Hubs seen and utilised as key regionally focused institutions for defining and delivering RDEA&C services (relating to drought resilience)
- Hubs work effectively as part of a national network/ architecture
- Efficient and effective activities to support RDEA&C and uptake by end users

Medium term

- Increased availability and accessibility of, and capacity to use and adopt, knowledge that can be applied to improve drought resilience
- Increased adoption and commercialisation of drought-resilience technologies and practices
- Technologies and practices adopted are effective in improving drought resilience
- Design and delivery of hub activities is responsive to end-user needs

Project overview

Containment feeding can enable strategic feeding to improve livestock productivity and welfare outcomes, help paddock feed to recover post-drought, maintain or improve groundcover, and potentially increase annual stocking rates. It can also protect soils and waterways, as well as improve pasture survival during drought and times of feed shortage.

This project is accelerating the adoption of containment feeding (CF) systems on farms by assembling and training a network of containment adoption advisors.

The SA Drought Hub worked with five farming systems groups to upskill advisors in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and southern New South Wales, with 15 advisors participating in a train-the-trainer workshop and an online decision-making masterclass.

There are plans to adapt the project for cattle, with interest from other drought hubs.

Benefits and resources emerging from the project

- A well-structured CF course, delivered to producers, with customised containment design and adoption plans for each enterprise.
- An implementation plan guide for advisors working one-on-one with producers.
- Newly established or significantly improved CF sites across the project areas.
- A Ration App spreadsheet tool for both advisors and producers to simplify ration creation and meet nutritional requirements.
- New tools and processes including decision pathways and satellite groundcover monitoring (accessed through the My Farm Dashboard).
- A central information repository, with the latest containment information available to all producers and farming organisations.
- Newly trained and networked containment adoption advisors across southern Australia who will provide ongoing services to farmers after the project finishes.
- Protection of soils, vegetation and riparian zones.
- Quicker recovery of livestock enterprises following drought.
- Increased farm and industry profitability through use of the CF facility in non-drought periods to, for example, meet condition score targets or finish lambs with low-cost grain.
- Increased engagement between producers and advisors.
- Partnerships across multiple nodes, hubs and regions.

Dr Penny Schulz

Livestock Technical Specialist Adoption Officer, SA Drought Hub

By upskilling advisors in SA, as well as in Victoria, Tasmania and southern NSW, to help producers implement CF, the project has benefited multiple regions and hubs.

We now have a community of containment feeding advisors that stretch across SA and beyond.

Many of these advisors have started working together and supporting each other to achieve better outcomes. They also have access to the expertise of Deb Scammell from Talking Livestock.

A critical part of the project's success has been the follow up by advisors to tailor CF setups for individual farms – An opportunity that hasn't always been provided.

As we continue to work with producers and advisors, we'll use their feedback to continually improve the resources and tools. This iterative process is often absent in comparable projects.



Paul Serle

Lamb producer, Tantanoola SA

Paul Serle runs 2,500 composite ewes with his wife Kylie on their 850-hectare grazing enterprise near Tantanoola. In 2024 they produced 6,000 lambs (a combination of farm-bred and traded). They use small paddocks as temporary containment areas but want something more permanent.

This year, we had lambs in paddocks on self-feeders but no CF for our ewes. We need some water and fencing infrastructure, and to work out the best way to do the troughing, probably feeding ewes via troughing outside the fence, with lambs on self-feeders.

Having CF set up would have made a difference this season. One of the nearby farmers with CF facilities was able to keep his ewes in and build a bigger feed wedge than us prior to lambing.

The workshops gave us a chance to exchange ideas – everyone had input and had seen different things. Having Ash Wachtel come out on farm was very useful. She pointed me in a direction that I hadn't considered regarding location of a CF operation.

There are several benefits we'd get from doing CF properly. The lambs would use less energy; we can better control the nutrition we deliver; and we'd reduce our travel requirements, which would save time and money. CF also lets you put more consistent weight on your lambs, which is something buyers want.

Ashlee Wachtel

Principal Consultant, Tailored Livestock Consulting, Robe SA

I attended train-the-trainer workshop led by Deb Scammell in the Barossa, then worked directly with eight producers.

The producer course included group sessions, one-on-one coaching, then coming back together afterwards. The peer-to-peer learning was very effective – a producer might mention something that did or didn't work, which prompts a conversation on why.

This is probably the worst autumn [2024] many of the producers have ever seen. Those who aren't doing CF now have paddocks that basically have no food on offer; those with CF facilities have at least some groundcover.

For producers who wanted to set up CF from scratch, we drove around the properties, looked at possible sites and pinpointed the most suitable. There are many factors – is it close to the road, to silos, to home? Is it sloping ground?



For those who already had some sort of CF setup, we fine-tuned things like rations, feeder space and how they were getting feed to the animals.

Half of the group participants didn't have a CF setup. After scoping out possible locations, feeding strategies, water accessibility and shelter, I sent them individual recommendations using Google Earth, so it was tailored to their own unique property.

In the final workshop, we went through each producer's recommendations as a group, to show other participants the reasoning behind the decisions about how to set up their containment pens.



Sheep producers inspect a containment feeding system during a workshop in Karoonda in March 2024.

Liam Brokensha

Lamb, wool and free-range egg producer, Eight Mile Creek SA

Liam Brokensha runs 4,500 cross-bred and composite ewes with his wife Sarah on their 1,000-hectare grazing enterprise near Eight Mile Creek. They have never used containment pens and wanted advice on implementing a CF system.

We had 19 ml of rain in May, 48 ml in June and 1 ml this month [mid-July 2024] – the break just didn't come.

We recently increased the number of sheep on farm. These last 18 months have highlighted the importance of having a facility that can look after those ewes through tough times.

Traditionally we've fed out barley in weeks leading up to 1 June, when we start lambing. This season I'm continuing to feed out during lambing. This isn't something we've done in the past, but there's just so little feed in the paddocks. I've purchased 125 bales of vetch hay in mid-June – due to the current high demand, this was expensive, but essential to see us through this tough period. The additional expense was not something we had budgeted for.



Ash Wachtel was excellent, and it was a good group of farmers. The small-group structure is always best; people feel comfortable with each other, and it was a good combination of theory and practice.

It was great having Ash come out onto the farm. I'd identified areas I thought might work for CF; she gave advice on these. It was also good to learn about the different types of CF systems – as well as the actual feeding – and what would suit us.

RESOURCES

PODCASTS

SA Drought Hub:
When do I let sheep out of containment in a dry season?

SA Drought Hub:
Livestock containment: building drought resilience with Cam Nicholson

MFMG:
Stock containment and decision making with Rodney Lush and Cam Nicholson

VIDEO

BIGG: Methods of feeding ewes in containment pens

GET INVOLVED

Producers wanting more information can contact Dr Penny Schulz at penny.schulz@adelaide.edu.au.

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