Consideration of wet weather management in stock containment design

Producer case study: Bobbie and Angus McLean

Location	Harrow & Coojar, Victoria
Area	1,200 ha
Enterprise	Prime lamb production with composite and crossbred lambs, superfine wool, beef cows producing steers and heifers for sale.
Livestock	4200 Sheep, 150 Cows & Heifers
Pastures	Predominately Holdfast GT phalaris, perennial ryegrass with sub-clover and annual pastures.
Soils	At Harrow tertiary sediment soils. Sandy loam over a poorly drained yellow clay or sandy clay subsoil loam. At Coojar heavier soil, loam over gravelly heavy clay.
Rainfall	Harrow 578 mm, Coojar 625 mm

While containment feeding is frequently associated with dry conditions, it was the issue of wet weather conditions that were causing concerns for the McLean family.

Bobbie and Angus McLean with their three teenage daughters farm 1220 ha at Harrow and Coojar in the Western District of Victoria.

They use containment yards for their prime lamb enterprises when feed runs out in summer and autumn to save pasture, protect their perennial pastures and keep groundcover on hills.

“Harrow is extremely hilly and has a light sedimentary soil type. It’s difficult to keep groundcover on the tops and sides of hills,” said Bobbie.

In 2016, they first built three containment yards because of dry conditions and the lack of paddock water. They then added another three. Fast forward to 2024 and they started building another six pens and thought carefully about their design.

Experience had taught them that when it does rain, the soil type being a sandy loam does not form a hard pad even under the high stock densities experienced within the pens. This means the pens can become muddy when its wet and dusty when its dry.

“When it rained the soil became greasy and slippery causing OHS issues when trying to bring the feeder into pens to fill self-feeders.

“Stock would dig out around the feeder mats making it difficult to get the auger into the right position,” she said.

What was a one-person job that could be easily done by Bobbie or her daughters, then became a two-person job where the approach had to be carefully negotiated.

In their new design, they have made pen sizes larger to give more area to move machinery around especially given their new pens contain trees. They increased the lane size to 20m wide allowing equipment to be moved easier and stock can still be contained when the gates are opened up. This has made feeding simpler and doesn’t require highly skilled labour.

They keep smaller mobs of 200 in pens to reduce the times they have to fill feeders and try to avoid filling them during wet weather. They have been experimenting with moving and placing feeders

every two weeks on old eaten down straw bales to reduce erosion around the feeders.

They tried augering from the laneway into feeders placed on the fenceline but found that problematic with some stock getting stuck between the fence and feeder.

Bobbie found locating the stock containment close to the yards and shearing shed as one of their best decisions.

“Stock can easily be moved into containment pens and it allows monitoring of livestock. If there is an issue in the pens, we can see what’s happening from the yards,” said Bobbie.

Jessie Wettenhall, Research and Extension Officer from Southern Farming Systems, visited the McLeans after they attended one of the MLA-funded Spring Tight Time workshops to discuss their containment ideas. Jessie gave them a booklet from the SA Drought hub on containment feeding. This helped their confidence in working out floor space and stock numbers.

Jessie said, “Producers don’t necessarily consider how to manage containment feeding once they get wet, which they will, as ewes are often contained over the break of the season.”

While careful site selection is necessary for helping to improve drainage there are other management options available. Jessie said designing pens to ensure run-off drains from the top to the bottom of the pen and does not flow into adjacent pens, drainage works, using footing materials such as wood chips to reduce mud around feeding or watering stations, using troughs to minimize feed wastage or even letting sheep out for a few days to dry out the pens are useful strategies.

“Having all-weather access and a plan for wet weather management in containment pens is critical for functionality,” she said.

Bobbie expects this will not be their last build, as she and Angus are keen to build containment facilities at their Coojar property having found them a valuable tool for managing pastures and meeting water supply and livestock feeding requirements.

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Image 1 *Filling the feeder 7th May 2025*

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