

EXCLUSION FENCING AND HOLISTIC OUTCOMES

John Cuskelly
Biosecurity Queensland,
Department of Agriculture and Fisheries,
Dalby Qld 4405

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss observations and learnings of landholders who have used exclusion fencing to protect sheep and goats from wild dog impact in the pastoral zones of South West Queensland.

There has been much investigation on wild dog biology and new and wonderful ways in which to kill wild dogs. Exclusion fencing has sometimes been derided because it is *not* based on lethal control; yet landholders report multiple benefits that were not primary drivers in their decision-making.

This paper examines what landholders have experienced since erecting exclusion fencing – with a context that is wider than just minimising wild dog impacts on small stock.

Keywords: exclusion fencing, holistic management.

INTRODUCTION

Queensland's pastoral regions were for over 100 years a sheep monoculture, with a sheep population in excess of 25 million. The majority of sheep properties had a boundary of exclusion fencing – in fact, it was a requirement of tenure in leasehold country.

Queensland enters 2019 with a sheep population of less than 2 million. Country towns that 'rode on the sheep's back' in times past have seen continual population decline and lowering employment opportunities. Towns, local governments and small businesses in the west want the return of sheep numbers to reverse the trend.

Biosecurity Queensland, with data provided by local governments, have mapped exclusion fencing data for western Queensland. In the last 5 years an estimated 15,000km of exclusion fencing has been erected, both privately funded and grant subsidised, predominantly with the purpose of re-establishing the sheep industry.

My role has been to community engagement in the field of wild dog management in the pastoral areas. This has allowed me to visit many fenced properties and have conversations with landholders, noting their experiences. To summarise what have the landholders who have fenced observed and learned, I have grouped their points under the broad headings below.

Landowners

Landholders report many personal benefits, which are in some ways separate to the benefits to their livestock.

- Mental health benefits – common to all respondents, a feeling of being in control. Also not being effected by the stress of having to deal with mauled livestock.
- Ability to select enterprise that best suits land type – particularly important in the mulga areas and the more marginal rangelands, where the economics of small stock are nearly double that of cattle.
- Grazing enterprise viability – follows on from the preceding point, but also encompasses the ability to take advantage of very good prices in wool, lamb, mutton and goat meat.
- In addition to the point above, landholders are better able to pursue organic product status, if they desire to do so.
- Generational succession planning is more straight-forward – some variables and uncertainties are removed when enterprises are given better economic sustainability.

Community

Like all of us, landholders live in a community rather than an economy. The social as well as the economic health of that community is largely dependent on the grazing enterprises surrounding it.

- Exclusion fencing provides (generally one off) business for contractors & retailers in the local community.
- Wool enterprises are large local employers – shearing and crutching are labour intensive.
- Other industries can emerge – the goat meatworks in Charleville currently employs 160 people and export to 100 global markets.
- Employment creates social capital in country towns – schools with healthy enrolled numbers, sporting teams, social clubs, etc.

Property boundary integrity

The primary driver of exclusion fencing both now and 100 years ago has been the exclusion of wild dogs from sheep flocks, but an animal proof fence has many benefits.

- Exclusion of wild dogs, foxes, pigs etc.
- Ability to manage goats – moving from harvesting of feral goats to farming goats. Goats have doubled in price in the last ten years.
- Sheep lice control between neighbouring flocks – sheep are the only vector for sheep lice.
- Less straying stock or opportunity for stock theft.

- The elimination of the mixing of neighbouring wool sheep with meat sheep with contaminating fibres.
- Exclusion fences enable the use of guardian dogs if so desired by landowners.
- Protection of cash or fodder crops from feral pigs and macropods.

Pastures & native vegetation

The original exclusion fencing that commenced in the 1860's was based on a bottom 900mm of rabbit netting topped with a 900mm of *marsupial* netting. The fencing protection from macropods is not something recent.

- Migratory macropod populations (of up to half the property's long-term carrying capacity) after local rainfall events can be controlled.
- Exclusion allows for true pasture spelling – not only farmed animals excluded.
- The positive role sheep/goats play in controlling native vegetation regrowth
- Allowing a fire regime to control suckers rather than mechanical clearing
- Some native plants can be difficult in grazing enterprises – for example, Pimelea poisoning is a real problem in cattle but much less so in sheep

Livestock production

The livestock production benefits are a little more straightforward and easier to manage.

- Less predation of livestock by wild dogs, foxes and feral pigs.
- Higher weaning rates of livestock – from both reduced predation but also from better nutrition through pasture management.
- Calmer stock, resulting in:
 - o Better mothering in breeding operations;
 - o Better quality & quantity of wool;
 - o Better growth rates of livestock;
- Greater enterprise adaption to rainfall variability – broadly speaking sheep and goats will perform better in dry times compared to cattle (e.g. supplementary feeding, destocking, etc.)
- Landholders have a greater ability to more accurately feed budget i.e. match livestock numbers to predicted pasture availability.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have endeavoured to cover beneficial holistic outcomes received by landholders who have erected exclusion fencing on the boundaries of their properties. That is not to say there will not be outcomes that cannot be included as beneficial – these will need to be identified and managed in the years ahead.

The decision to exclusion fence or not to exclusion fence for a sheep or goat enterprise is often based purely on a cost benefit analysis looking at wild dog predation; yet landholders who have fenced refer constantly to a whole range of benefits that are not costed in traditional methods.

These benefits should be taken into consideration in the future when discussing the pros and cons of exclusion fencing in South West Queensland.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the landholders of South West Queensland who have allowed me their time to visit and discuss their exclusion fencing experience, particularly –

- Duncan Banks & Gerry Grant, 'Dunwold', Dirranbandi.
- Councillor Jan Chambers, 'Glenelg', Mungallala.
- Stephen Tinkler, 'Cardiff', Bollon.