

A 'Pied-Piper' System of Encapturing Sheep for Condition Score Monitoring

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The *Lifetime Wool* programme has identified condition score (CS) targets for breeding ewes at key times during the breeding cycle (A.N. Thompson, *personal communication* 2010). However, one hindrance to the practical application and on-farm adoption of this research is the time required to move a mob of sheep to yards which may be some distance from the grazed paddock. In addition, the time between recommended assessments can be lengthy. For example, the period between an assessment prior to mating [30 days before pregnancy] and at removal of rams [day 35 of pregnancy] may be in excess of 2 months, during which time pasture conditions may change markedly and result in changes in sheep CS which may go unnoticed, especially if masked by wool growth. Significant deviations from the optimum CS profile may occur.

A *Grazing Systems Analysis Project* at the Mt. Barker Research Station in Western Australia has used the 'pied-piper' behaviour of sheep during feeding over summer to entice a representative sample of ewes into a small holding yard. The yard was constructed along an existing fenceline using star pickets and ringlock wire. A gate, transported on the back of the feedcart and held in place between 4 start pickets, was used to block one end of the yard while a cocky gate at the end of the 'winged' section was used at the other end (Figure 1). An internal cocky gate, 'hinged' in the narrow part of the yard, was used to condense the sheep into a smaller area to allow easy CS assessment.

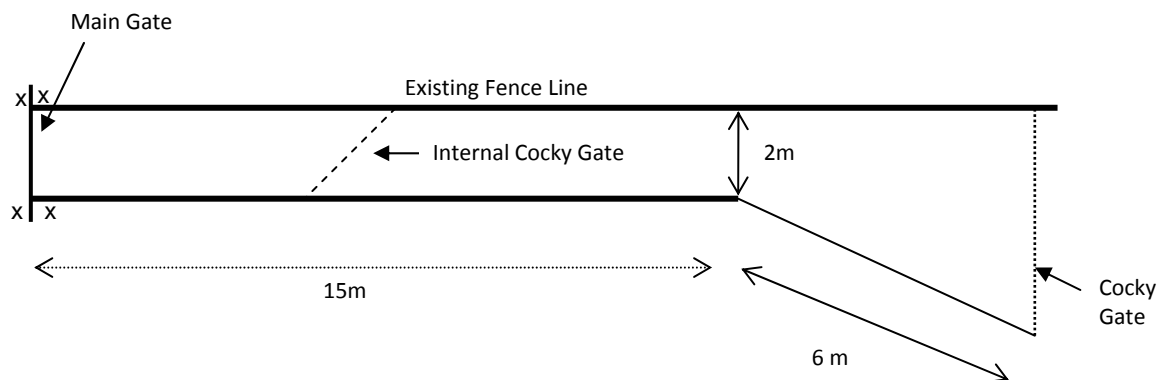


Figure 1. The design and dimensions of the 'pied-piper' holding yard

The 'pied-piper' system was effective with ~120 ewes following the feed cart into the holding yard. The internal 'cocky' gate successfully condensed animals to allow easy assessment of CS. The time required to obtain a CS update was significantly reduced compared to droving sheep to yards from a paddock 400m away.

Further streamlining of this method would use a palm-held data logger programmed for voice-commands to enter condition scores. Automatic calculations of the average CS, and the change in CS since last assessment, would enable adjustments to the feeding rate to be made there-and-then.

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