

CAM Phase Two: Making Progress

Cluster exclusion fences continue to be erected throughout the South West region as Phase Two of the CAM project advances. Despite some early delays due to a huge demand in fencing materials and extreme weather conditions, fencing is now strongly progressing. In fact, the completion of the first cluster under Round One of the Queensland Government's Feral Pest Initiative is well ahead of time.

"Last year when the Queensland Government announced the funding of another \$5 million it was expected that by July 2017 we would see some finished clusters. Due to the leadership and enthusiasm of their Coordinator Lauren Schmidt, the Coban cluster east of Cunnamulla is already finished," said Mark O'Brien, Queensland Government Wild Dog Fence Commissioner and Chair of South West NRM. "This is a perfect example of how Collaborative Area Management Systems are supposed to work, and we at South West NRM couldn't be happier for the graziers," Mark said.

The neighbouring graziers that make up the Coban cluster are celebrating the completion of close to 150 kilometres of pest fencing in an attempt to reduce an annual loss of \$1 million in production. The group of six graziers banded together in the hope of bringing wild dog numbers under control. The eight properties, which stock Merino and Dorper sheep, a Merino stud as well as cattle, were experiencing particularly high impacts from wild dogs. On average, they were only stocking 50% of the potential carrying capacity of their productive country near Cunnamulla.

Richard and Lauren Schmidt are only relatively new to their property *Harriman Park* just outside of Cunnamulla, but are part of a long-term wool producing family around South West Queensland. Richard Schmidt was surprised at the extent of impact despite the relatively small wild dog numbers in the area. 176 sheep within the cluster area have been recorded as killed by wild dogs since 2014. "Some properties in the district have seen lambing drop from 100% down to 55% over the past few years and wool yields have also decreased" Richard reported.

"We got together as a group to try and be proactive while dog numbers are relatively low and get on top of the impacts before it is no longer viable to run sheep. Since 2014, we have collectively trapped and shot 26 dogs within the cluster area, and we all bait regularly. Other pests have also been targeted in efforts to improve production and health of our land. Nearly 1000 pigs have been removed as well as significant fox and feral cat numbers. The fence will make our job a lot easier so re-infestation doesn't occur, which has been our experience in other areas with just baiting and shooting." he continued.

"When the assistance for pest fencing was advertised our local group of neighbours were quick to jump at the opportunity to try and protect our good sheep country. The funding made it affordable to get a contractor in to construct the fence and we are pretty pleased to have it finished ahead of time," Mr Schmidt said.

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A total of 93 kilometres of high integrity exclusion fencing made from Clipex materials was constructed four months ahead of time. Consistent with South West NRM's original goal of creating a 'honeycomb' effect of protective fences, the cluster only required 64% of the total perimeter of fencing to fully enclose itself, taking advantage of an adjoining existing cluster.

CAM Project Manager and economist Jon Grant has estimated the impacts from pests to be close to \$1 million annually over the eight properties, covering 81,540 hectares. This is equivalent to \$12.15/hectare or \$49.18/current Dry Sheep Equivalent (DSE) being stocked. These impacts, collectively from wild dogs, feral pigs and excessive kangaroo populations, severely erode the profitability of agricultural businesses in the region.

During a fence inspection last week Mark O'Brien was told that current stocking rates are only 50% of what the carrying capacity typically is for this type of country. "The project expects that carrying capacity can return to 100%, or where stocking rates remain lower the properties will be significantly stronger in drought conditions. The investment in fencing has potential to reduce costs for the federal government through delaying drought assistance." Jon said.

Mr O'Brien said landholder group applications for the third phase of funding for a share of \$2 million is currently being assessed for the shires of Murweh, Paroo, and Quilpie, as well as Bulloo (see article on the following page).

Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, Bill Byrne commented "tackling the scourge of wild dogs has been a priority for the Palaszczuk Government. This Government has been able to contribute to a renaissance in the sheep industry in Queensland by delivering funding to assist in the construction of cluster fencing. It is great to hear that part of our funding has already seen the completion of fencing projects ahead of time and is a credit to the community".

It is expected over the next 3-4 months a large majority of the remaining 14 Phase Two clusters will be completed, with the regional and local economic benefits of the project a soon realization.

Right: Richard and Lauren Schmidt of *Harriman Park* near Cunnamulla showing off near their newly constructed CAM fence to Mark O'Brien, Queensland Government Wild Dog Fence Commissioner and Chair of South West NRM. The Schmidts are part of the Coban CAM cluster which has completed fencing construction of ahead of schedule.

