

Fencing, Laneways, Shelters and Work areas

By Karine Raiz, Surilox Alpacas

Well here we are! Officially ensconced in farm No.3, and it is beautiful. I am looking out from the homestead over the farm. It is an historic farm, part of the original subdivision of the district. It was originally granted to the AA company, who decided that the land was unsuitable for sheep, so gave it back to the State, in exchange for 4 times as much land in the New England district. There was a gold rush here. The timber getters found mahogany. We have history here! Fabulous!

The gently undulating hills, the gurgling river, the gorgeous dams, the pasture both improved and unimproved – these things make me smile. The one thing that makes me sigh “Oh the Work!,” is the view of the paddock fences, and the question in my mind is “Didn’t any of the previous owners think about moving animals around? Didn’t anyone consider optimum grazing areas; access for stock to water? and Why did they put that gate there?”

The problem with taking over a farm that has been owned and run the same way that the original settlers ran it is that there was little to no forward thinking in the planning. Paddocks were fenced in multi-acre blocks, with the fences in the most convenient places to minimise the expense of the fencing itself. Cell grazing was an unknown concept. No consideration was given to what would be run in those acres, and the best way to move that stock.

If you remember my last few articles you would know that we run alpacas, but the consideration of fencing is similar whatever you run on your land. It is true for farmers who are experienced, and even more so for new farmers.

The main issue is the need for infrastructure that assists you in dealing with your livestock. You need to be able to move them around the farm easily and calmly, have them safe, well fed and watered in their paddocks. They need to be able to shelter from the weather, the heat, the cold; and you need yards where you can maintain your husbandry routine.

Fences. Each of the 3 farms that we have owned has had fairly decent perimeter fences. As most farms in Australia were originally used for either cattle or sheep, your farm probably has a 3 or 4 strand barbed wire fence, with wooden fence posts. This is great if you continue cattle or sheep farming. For alpaca and goat breeders you will probably want to put dog fence on the inside of that existing fence.

What I mean here is you want to think about running dog mesh around your perimeter. Dog mesh comes in 3ft or 4ft heights, or for those who are not metrically challenged in widths around 0.9 – 1.2 metres. You can either attach the dog mesh to the wooden fence posts using staples, or use a ring lock tool to attach the mesh to the barb wire strands. Internal fences for alpacas can be a 3, 5 or 7 wire strand fence. Most alpacas are respectful of fences and don’t tend to climb through or challenge a fence.

We have found that even though Australia has been metric in measurements since 1970, the rural world still measures things “the way my grand-dad did.”

Sheep farmers, you need to maintain those fences and acquire some alpaca wethers to guard your sheep.

Deer farmers will need to re-fence to the correct height for the particular deer they are running. These fences can often start at 8ft [2.4 metres] and occasionally be even higher.

So where do you put the internal fencing? We find that a laneway system that runs through the entire farm works well, no matter which stock you are grazing. All paddocks run from a series of interconnected laneways. We use the main driveway through the farm as the main laneway, and have other laneways parallel to this in the farm. In this way we can keep the girls and boys separate, in their own parts of the farm, and move each group between their designated night paddocks [the ones closest to the homestead] to their day paddocks.

As Nardoo [the new farm] is quite large we also plan to run a few smaller intersecting laneways. This should make moving alpacas around the farm much easier.

Laneways & Work areas

Here are the things to consider

1. What animals will you move around the farm? Will you need them to move regularly from one place to another?

Alpacas, goats and sheep will move in a straight line while being pushed from behind. We walk behind our alpacas, and click our fingers. No loud noises are necessary, and we keep our animals quiet. We also point to the place we want them to go, and they do eventually get the message. In this way they are

happy to move where we want them to go. Deer are flighty and easily startled. When they are startled, they panic and tend to run in a straight line. So if your laneways are straight your deer will possibly end up running into a corner at full pelt. The only way to avoid this is to curve your laneways. Move them quietly, no loud noises. Move them during the brightest part of the day, when they can't be startled by shadows.

2. How wide do laneways have to be? Consider that your main laneway is probably your driveway. It should be as wide as a truck needs to move through your farm. This could be the truck with the lime you are having delivered, or even the RFS Appliance [in NSW] that is stopping in to fight a fire, or even fill up with water from your dam. Generally the RFS asks for the main drive to be a minimum of 6 metres wide. Check your DCP [Council Development Control Plan] which is available on the internet.
3. Where should gates be? Not at the corners of the paddocks. A truck will not be able to turn into your paddock easily, and neither will you. There should be at least one gate for each paddock into the laneway, more than one is excellent, and it is a good idea to have a gate between the paddocks too. We often hang a couple of gates in the corner of a paddock, to make a work area that we can pen some animals into. Paddocks facing each other across the laneway should have their gates facing each other, this way the gates can form a mini-laneway so that you can move animals from one paddock to the one across the laneway easily. The gates themselves should hang on diagonally opposite posts. This will enhance the movement of stock across the laneway.
4. We also have the laneways that allow us to run the alpacas into a main work area, where we have pens of various sizes that are used for mating pens, hospital, treatment and husbandry, and to funnel the alpacas into the shearing shed, and gather them after shearing to go back into their paddocks.

Shelters

Every paddock in our farm has shelter for the animals. All grazing animals need shelter. Shelter can be as simple as a grove of trees. The trees provide shade and wind breaks.

In the past farmers removed trees from paddocks with the thought that the less trees present, the more grass that can be grown. Agronomists have found that this is largely faulty reasoning. The beauty of retaining and even enhancing tree lines in the paddocks is that the animals have shelter, the trees assist in retaining humus and moisture in the soil especially in summer and during drought. Paddocks with more trees retain more water and therefore grow better grass. Conversely during times of extreme rain, paddocks with more trees have less topsoil erosion than those without trees.

We also build shelters in our paddocks and our alpacas love them. We know goat and deer breeders who build similar shelters. We build these shelters because the eastern states of Australia can be subjected to severe storms that combine high cold winds with many days of unrelenting rain. These events, known as East Coast Lows, are the equivalent of a winter inland cyclone. As with alpacas, most ruminant grazing animals are susceptible to a combination of cold, wet and wind chill. While 2 out of 3 usually can't harm your livestock, all 3 can be devastating.

We tend to build night shelters with 3 corrugated metal sides and roof. These shelters are around 2.5 metres tall. For shelters that are in day paddocks the sides can be made of 90% shade-cloth to break the wind. We use a metal roof for each shelter because we run guttering to a rainwater tank. Each of these shelters has a gravity-fed water bowl. This helps keep the animals dry during bad weather as they are able to reach water easily. We also keep the alpacas feed troughs in their night shelters, so they are used to going to these shelters when feeding and at night. These shelters are actually tall enough for a horse to shelter in. This is important as we often allow Red, the chestnut gelding, in to a paddock that is being rested from the alpacas. Red tends to eat many things that the alpacas don't, so he forms part of our paddock management technique. Once Red has done his bit, we fertilise with compost tea and then rest the paddock.

The size of these sheds is important. Most councils in rural NSW have a 20 square metre limit to a stock shelter. Councils generally require a DA to build a larger shelter, however most councils are reasonably sensible about enforcing animal shelter requirements. Again, check with your DCP available online.

When designing the shearing shed, we ensure that all the laneways are connected to the lane that leads to the shearing / work shed. For our needs we have designed a husbandry area that leads directly into the hospital precinct of the work shed. In here we maintain all our husbandry stock and equipment; injectors, serum, toe-nail clippers etc. This area can also shelter our stock if necessary.

Planning your Laneways, Shelters and Fences.

An aerial photograph is a big help in dividing your farm, and planning the work to be done. They are available from the State Government Lands Dept. When ordering your photo check that the image that is being used is a recent one. In some areas of NSW the Dept of Lands only updates its photos every 10 or more years. If this

is the case try speaking to the local aero-club. Your local produce store should also know of several local flyers who could take a customised photo of your farm.

Lifestyle is important to us, it's why we moved to our first farm, and it's why we have moved to our new farm. Good planning of Fences, Laneways and Shelters makes life on a farm so much easier.