

Beef Production: The Basics

Fencing

Fencing on farms is erected for a number of reasons, including separating the property of different owners, keeping livestock within certain areas or out of other areas and for security. For the beef farmer the following are considerations when deciding on fencing:

- Cost. Putting up fencing is very expensive. Subsequent maintenance of fences requires a great deal of time and further costs.
- Topography of the farm. For effective grazing management, it is necessary to separate different veld types. Where a farm comprises a large spectrum of different veld types, especially where the relevant veld types differ significantly in palatability, more fencing has to be erected compared to a farm where there is little or no variation.
- Type of livestock the farmer intends keeping, livestock numbers and herd sizes.
- Labour. Where labour is limiting, a farmer could decide to fence walking passages along which herds can be moved by a single person.

The following guidelines apply to beef cattle. Should a farmer intend erecting game fencing or running small stock like sheep or goats, the type of fencing erected will differ a great deal.

Farmers are well advised to carry out a farm plan before embarking on the erection of fences. Clearly, livestock must be prevented from straying onto neighbouring land or into cropping areas. It is more difficult to decide to what extent veld types must be separated and how many paddocks must be planned for in association with the number of herds on a farm. The desired grazing strategy for the relevant bioclimatic area must also be taken into account. Experience has shown that it is better to do less fencing than that indicated by the initial farm plan. Adapting herds, herd sizes and herd management to the paddock sizes is often feasible. Cattle, through their grazing habits, will very soon indicate where additional fencing is needed. When it is found that herd and veld management is difficult, the addition of one or more paddocks can be considered. It is more cost-effective to start with too few paddocks and add as required and as indicated by grazing patterns than to start with too many paddocks. Many paddocks is very convenient, but adds to running costs and becomes a drain on labour when maintenance is necessary, especially where fires are part of grazing management. Fire shortens the lifetime of fences and when wooden droppers and fencing posts are used, these burn, even when treated timber is used.

Where calves are able to push through fences while they are small, they tend to continue this bad habit into adulthood. Ensuring that cows with calves are in paddocks where the fencing is of a high standard, prevents them from forcing their way through, which conditions them to see fences as barriers. This conditioning often lasts all their lives.

Straining posts

Once the position of a fence is decided, the places where straining posts will be placed are chosen. Straining posts should not be more than 500 metres apart. The fence will be pulled tightly from straining post to straining post and the line between them must be relatively straight. Siting straining posts on a crest makes it easier to strain the fence over the hill and ensures that it does not sag over the rise. Where the land dips and no straining post is erected in the hollow, steps will have to be taken to fill the gap under the fence.

Standards and droppers

Standards can be from 12 to 16 metres apart. Where they are set in the ground 12 metres apart, only three droppers are needed between standards, whereas when they are further apart, it is preferable to place 4 droppers between standards.

Where the topography is very uneven, standards should be closer together, but on fairly level ground, they can be placed further apart.

Wire

For beef cattle, 5 strands of wire in a fence are sufficient. A height of 1200 mm is advised. Although farmers usually use barbed wire, smooth wire can be used. An advantage of barbed wire is that the barbs prevent droppers from sliding. Should cattle decide to push through a barbed wire fence, the barbs cause damage to hides and injure the animals, but barbed wire does not appear to deter cattle from forcing through a fence. People are deterred by barbed wire.

It has been shown that straining wire too tightly causes damage to the fence when the veld under such a fence burns. When wire is strained in the heat of day during summer, fences break when subjected to cold. Adequate tension in association with the correct number of droppers and standards, provides a cattle proof fence.

Gates

Herding cattle through a gate situated in the corner of a paddock is easier than when the gate is placed along a long boundary. Placing four gates in the corner where 4 paddocks meet, makes it very easy to move a herd from one paddock to any of the other three paddocks at the one place. Cattle become accustomed to this exchange point and only one area is severely trampled.