

Permanent Fencing vs. Portable Electric Chicken Fencing with Shane Ellis Episode 4

Transcriptions:

Daniel: Daniel O'Brien here. Welcome back to greengrassseggfarming.com. My special guest today is Shane Ellis from Gippsland Free Range. Welcome!

Shane: Hi Daniel, thank you very much.

Daniel: It's good to have you, Shane. Today we're going to be talking about electric chicken fencing, temporary fencing vs. permanent fencing and I wanted to get some wisdom from you as to why someone would go with temporary fencing vs. permanent fencing.

Shane: Yeah we've had a go at both so, a bit of practical experience with permanent fencing and the temporary electro netting which is all we use now. I suppose the first thing I think about when your pullets first arrive is, putting that electro netting around them, fairly close to the shed. Straight away – and my background is with cattle and I do a lot of electric fencing and strip grazing, but this is an education process – with these chickens coming out, touching their head on the electro netting for a couple of days, all of a sudden every fence they seem to face, they think it's going to bite them.

Then we slowly move the netting out to give them that bigger area, and then we don't have any problem with going over the fence. That's the first thing that strikes you but then ultimately we got it for protection, you know, against foxes, cats and dogs. Not that we have many wild dogs here but you might get domesticated dogs come in off the road and want to chase the chickens or whatever, they don't like the electro netting either.

Daniel: Bites them on the nose as well.

Shane: Yeah, it works well in that regard.

Daniel: Obviously the purpose of temporary fencing is exactly that. It's temporary, it's portable, we can obviously make a square or a rectangle, sit the chooks in it and then move it on. It gives us the flexibility to do things like, grazing, like you're talking about earlier like with the cattle, put them in there for a certain period of time and then you move them on so you get that recovery time.

Shane: That's really important we've found in the five coming up six years we've been using it. Chickens will cause a bit of damage to a bit of bare ground and you can control that and move them over it that bit quicker, we really like it in that regard. Also you can look at, if you're passing across a paddock and cattle of grazing pasture, you'll actually see where your chicken caravans have sat and you can re-align with your fences so that you are not over fertilising some areas. There might be some areas in the paddock you want to give special attention to, a grass you might want to knock around, you can leave their nets set up a little bit longer and let the chickens really go to work on it you know.

Daniel: Yeah, it gives you a lot of flexibility like that, so if someone's getting started and they go "ok I could buy some [temporary fencing](#), some [electric fencing](#) and move the squares around or I could set up [permanent fencing](#)" what are the pros and cons from your point of view.

Shane: Yeah, having done both, I did start out by setting up a lot of [permanent fences](#) and it just so happened that I was a fencing contractor, that does give you a fair head start to it. For someone, if you haven't handled wire netting, it can be a fair choice, specially on unsulating ground. Flipping it to existing fences it's really hard to get it sitting right, it will well and dip over hollows and rises in your paddocks. I guess I had some idea of what I was doing, but there's quite a labour component to putting the wire netting up and also once it's up, that's where it is, you don't have the flexibility to move it again, you're not likely to.

Daniel: Yeah that's right, one of the things I find with [permanent fencing](#) and you can probably share some wisdom on this as well, obviously as you said a labour cost and also a dollar cost in putting that fence up. One thing I hate about [permanent fences](#) specially if it's a chicken mesh fence as opposed to three barb wires is maintaining it. You're going to get grass and weeds and trees and you can't just go in with the slasher or the brush hook and just go underneath it and wipe it out cause you need that to go right to the ground and in some cases into the ground a bit.

Shane: That's right, and whilst you've got those grasses and bushes coming up against the fence, it lessens the life of the wire so then that compromises the safety of your chickens, there is that maintenance thing. If you try to slash beside it all of a sudden you've just done a couple of hundred dollars worth of damage to a piece of wire netting. There's the cost of replacing that piece and the labour to put it up there. We had a lot of trouble also with chickens not respecting it, just jumping up on it. So we'd make it higher and then they find another way to go up and get on top of the strainer post and then jump over.

In terms of labour, shifting your sheds and moving your chickens, yeah beautiful – like cattle, open the gate, let them in and when they're finished in there you open the gate and let them out. It just doesn't seem to be that simple though with the chickens and I think the electro netting won us over, because it does educate them from the first day they're here.

Daniel: Yeah and the other thing with [permanent fencing](#) is, sometimes when you first start you don't realise how much land, say, 400 chooks needs. It's easy to go "Oh, we'll just fence in this area and just rotate them round in there" but most people, if they pick an area, they'll pick it too small and then it's over grazed, it never gets that recovery time. So even though your shed might be over in this corner of a ten acre paddock, your chooks will still wander around so where the chooks were the day before, your grass isn't getting that rest time where it can just grow and it doesn't have anything eating it or chewing it down, it can just grow.

Shane: That's right, everytime it's growing it's expending energy and to have something nipping it off sooner than it should, you've got that root die back underground. It's expended energy so it won't recover as quickly the second time. The other thing I've seen with some pretty well set up free range egg farms is [permanent fences](#), with little lane ways between with all sorts of shrubs and bushes that the chickens can enter, through gates.

Works really well, the idea is when a paddock becomes empty to give it that long rest recovery, have that spell, but then you start looking at the investment in that paddock – well, we put all that netting on, maybe we should get some chickens in here a little bit sooner, just to get some eggs out of them, to get some money back for that netting that's on the fence. So the intention might be there to rest that paddock but then you'll be looking at it thinking, "Oh, no I really need to make this pay".

Daniel: Yeah, and you'd know first hand. You've been a fencing contractor putting wire netting at probably six foot high or two metres high. It's expensive just to buy that roll. You go to a rural supplier and say, I want to price some chicken wire that's two meters high, even if the thing's only 30 metres long, it's expensive, let alone the post and labour and all the clips and the other stuff that myself and others that aren't fencing contractors would know about, all the other stuff that goes into that putting it up. And as you said, once it's there you want to hope that that's the right spot cause it's not moving.

Shane: Yeah, another thing I've just thought about Daniel, you might not own the land. If you're leasing the land or you've got some sort of share arrangement with the farmer who's running cattle and you bring your chickens to the operation it's a bit of a tough one sorting out who pays for the netting, and, do I get it back at the end of it if it's wire netting. The electro netting works really well in that sense. We lease a little bit of land here. It's great. When the lease is up we can just roll our nets up and move on to the next bit of land, you know.

Daniel: Yeah, there's definitely something to be said for portable infrastructure and like you said we've got some other customers that lease land as well. It makes it so easy cause you can be there one day and like you said you literally roll up your nets. I could say to you "this afternoon can you pack all that up and be gone by tomorrow". It's so easy and I think with that flexibility, the opportunities in farming open up so much broader cause you don't have to look out your back window and think, that's all I can farm on. You can

look, well, who else has got land, who else could do with some chook manure. There's a lot of farmers locally to most people, who wouldn't mind having a few chooks running.

Shane: Oh that's right and I wouldn't even charge for the fertiliser! It's a pretty good relationship too, someone has the farm going and they spent a lot of money on fertiliser and you can now say, take that paddock out I'll run my chickens across it and let's see how it compares with the rest of the farm. You can come and do it all, portable, and quite simply. I think one of the things with the electro net too is, you can make it easy and I've seen some people make it look really difficult, setting the nets up and packing them up and putting them up. You spend a little bit of time working it out or get someone to show you how to make it better, yeah its simple to handle.

Daniel: Yeah, walk me through it. So you run four nets 50 metres by 50 metres and a caravan inside, is that right?

Shane: That's right.

Daniel: Walk me through what happens when you want to move those chickens to a new patch of grass. What do you need to do, you've got a chicken caravan and you've got a square surrounding it, four nets which are 50 metres long each, what needs to happen?

Shane: If I'm just moving in, it doesn't matter, you can move north, south, east, west or whatever direction you like from that enclosure, as long as you have room. Always just roughly pace it out. If I'm getting close to a boundary fence, I'll just pace it out, to make sure I've got room to set my new nets up. Then what I'll do is I'll set up a net running away from the enclosure and I'll be looking down the other fence, the other [electro netting fence](#) somewhere roughly in line, I'll put those pegs in the ground, stomp on the pegs on the ground so it's all standing up nice and taut.

I'll then go to the other side and I'll lay that net out so it's running parallel, 50 metres across the paddock, running parallel to the net I've just put up. Then looking down the fence, the [electro netting fence](#) where the chickens are. So I'll know they're roughly going to be 50 metres apart at the end of the netting, then I'll leave that laying along the ground and don't stand that up just yet.

I'll then lay my other net out, from those ends, the ends of the one that's standing up and the one lying down and it might take a little bit of adjustment, you might just have to move it out, it could be five metres or six metres, it won't be much. Then I'll stand those two up so then I got three nets standing up and adjoining the electro netting where the chickens are.

Daniel: So if we're looking at that from the top view, we're looking at a rectangle which is 100 metres long by 50 metres wide and through the centre at exactly 50 metres it's got a fence which is separating it through the current square they're in and a brand new square they're about to go in, is that right?

Shane: Yep, you've got the picture, and what I've found, it's a bit like cattle, once your chickens and your alpacas or your dogs have seen all this happen before, they almost line up at that centre fence waiting to go through. So then I go to that centre fence, as you say looking down there's a fence through the middle, 50 metres long. I'll peel that back about half way and then hop on the tractor and by that time the chickens have raced you through. They're going though on a new pasture and looking for crickets and bugs, and flipping over cow manure and then you just idle that tractor through.

The balance of the chickens will follow you, it might only be one or two will be hanging back, a little bit confused about where the house is gone, but it doesn't take them long to realise, I'd better get over there with my mates. Once they're all through then I just stand that middle fence back up, stretch it out, stand it back up and the chickens really don't pay a lot of attention to you because they're really busy at having a look what's in this new pasture.

Daniel: Yeah. I've got a video up on YouTube, it's been up there for four years or more now, it's got well over half a million views and it's just opening up that centre fence and I sat a camera there to explain to people about the big race – you open up that, first thing, as you said they literally standing there going "Open the fence faster, we are ready to go in" and as soon as you do it's just like, it's like a mosh pit going. Let us have it, I want to get the bugs and beetles and worms before anyone else, and it's amazing to see.

Shane: You can go any direction. Looking down on that 100 metres along the rectangle and 50 metres wide, you pack up those three nets, where they've come from, and then if I want to change direction I just tack onto the other side of that square and go in another direction if I want to.

Daniel: So what sort of time frame from when you pull up. You've got three nets and a ute or something. To set them up, move the caravan through, pack the others down, what sort of time frame you're looking at to do that.

Shane: Look, I'd allow myself three quarters of an hour to an hour just to, you know, have everything through.

Daniel: We're not talking about a day's job, we're talking about something under an hour. You've moved the caravan, you've moved the nets and you're gone, you're finished.

Shane: Yep that's right, I'm onto the next job.

Daniel: Cause I think some of the idea that people have, "Oh, portable fencing, that you have to move, oh it's going to take so long to do it all" and obviously you've found and I've found, once you know what you're doing it's pretty fast. It's the first few weeks when you think, "Ok, how do I do this again" and just getting your procedure down pat, after you do that, it's 45 minutes and you're gone, you've left, it's all over.

Shane: That's right and you've never seen happier chickens, they're having a great time out there. I don't get sick of seeing that. They're going into that new pasture and we try and graze just in front of the chicken enclosures so that the grass is relatively short, we still leave a little bit of grass there so the chickens have got grass to eat as well, and that's then not competing with long grass, not getting resistance from shorting out, that sort of thing.

Daniel: So, your cattle come in, they eat it down, you can move your chickens on later. Now obviously every farm's going to be different with the seasons but with your farm, in your location, so you're in Gippsland Victoria, how long would you leave your chooks in that 50 by 50 metre square?

Shane: It will vary from seasons. We'll tend to really keep an eye on it, generally we will be looking at it about six days, we will be looking at in four days, we will be looking at, are they creating any damage. If they're not and we've moved that shed a number of times inside that enclosure, if they're not creating any damage we'll run them to about six days.

If they're starting to knock it round after four days we will then start to plan our next move. If we've got to bring cattle in from a paddock or so away, we'll go and we'll graze it, get them set up, ready to go. Before we had enough cattle to graze in front, we would just slash lines where the electro netting would go and that's fine but it is nice getting the cattle to do the job for you.

Daniel: Yeah definitely.

RECAP:

Daniel: Ok, just a recap then, the benefits for your [electric fences](#): first day that your chickens come, it trains them well, when they're trained, they put their nose or head on the fence Bang! they get a bit of a bite, they will respect it. It's good for the ground so you can move them regularly, as you said when you start seeing the ground's had enough impact, you've got the option just to move it vs. your [permanent fencing](#): the labor, the time to put it up. It takes a long time, it costs money, when it's there it's there, you can't move it and there's no restor recovery period if you going to run one paddock.

Then if you're going to do multiple paddocks you've got more money putting centre fences in. Overall it sounds like temporary fencing, for your operation and from what I have seen for most operations, works really well, it gives you a lot of options and flexibility. And one thing we haven't really touched on, it's electrified to keep the chooks in but also to keep the predators out. You said you have the stray dog that walks in from the road, and foxes. How have you found it, how effective have you found it cause ultimately people want to know "do they work?" "do the foxes still get in?".

Shane: Yeah, no they won't, when you set it up right and you've got your [electric fencing](#). That's probably the other thing – to make sure that the [electric fence](#) unit suits that netting and the length of the grass that they're on. But yeah, look, we have found it very effective.

We'll find fox manure just outside the electro netting, so they're about. I don't go out with a spotlight very often at all now. I figured, if I get rid of a fox another only moves in anyway. I don't worry about it too much.

We do have alpacas and dogs but at times there will be an enclosure that doesn't have alpacas and dogs in it and we don't have any problems inside the netting. The only thing is, you've just got to watch the ground, you use a peg to peg it down if it's sitting up over a little bit of a hollow, foxes can get very creative when they want to and they know, there's a delicious meal on the other side of the fence, but if it's put up right and your [electric fence](#) unit is right, yeah, no problem at all.

Daniel: Yeah, fantastic and I found similar results. Set up right with a good size energiser – and that's one thing I definitely recommend, get a good size energiser. There's no point getting an amazing fence that can keep the foxes out and then you just get a tiny compact energiser that's not going to run it. I'll use an example – like buying a Ferrari and saying, "Oh, I don't want the Ferrari motor, I'll just put a Hyundai motor in it". You're not going to get the performance. It might look pretty but it's not going to deliver.

Shane: Well, and the other thing too, people overlook their earthing system. So you can have a big electric fence unit but unless you've got a good earth system and that is a decent galvanised or stainless steel stake driven well into the ground, your fence may not be able to deliver that power. We find in a dry time even just to have a 20 litre drum with a couple of mm sized hole drilled in the bottom of it, filled with water, sitting next to your earth stake, will lift your fence by 2000 volts, in a dry time.

Daniel: So you go through dry times, where you are. When you say, hammered into the ground, in a dry time, how far would you hammer a galvanised or stainless steel stake into the ground?

Shane: I hammer it in 300mm, and if that's not cutting it for whatever reason, if you've got a long grass touching the netting or something like that, then move a metre away from that earth stake and bang another one in and then link them together, and it's amazing how much lift the power on your fence.

Daniel: So in dry climates, two earth stakes, link them together and also a 20 litre drum full of water. You'll just have that dripping, just to create a bit of moisture. I'm not an [electric fence](#) expert, you might be able to explain this, but the whole way an [electric fence](#) works is, you've got the animal standing on the ground, they should be earthed, and then their nose or foot or tail touches the fence and then they complete the system and that's where they get the bang through their bodies, is that right?

Shane: That's right, and a great way to check just really quickly: if someone's at the unit is not by grabbing it of course, if you test an [electric fence](#) tester on your earth stake and you're getting more volts there than on your fence, you've got an earth problem. You need to get moisture on it or another earth stake or bang it in deeper and that's in dry soil conditions.

We've just have a bit of rain here in the last couple of weeks and we are starting to see some green grass and there is moisture below the surface, we don't have to be as fussy with the drums of water. We just have to bang that stake in a good 300 mm into the ground. A quick test is to put your [electric fence](#) tester on the earth stake and if those volts are reading up near your [electric fence netting](#), or above, you haven't got a good enough earth.

Daniel: Yeah ok. For someone who's never dealt with [electric fences](#), why do you put a bit of water near the earth stake? It seems like if you've never done it before it just seems weird, you've got a steel peg in the ground and you're watering it. It's not going to grow like a tree, can you explain why you do that?

Shane: An electrician would be able to tell you exactly how it happens but in my knowledge it's just about connecting that earth wire, having a lot bigger and greater connection to the earth. Wet soil will conduct electricity a lot better than dry soil.

Daniel: Yeah, I know when someone first explained it to me, you want me to wet a steel rod that's in the ground, it didn't really make sense. Then, just like you said, water is a conductor. Keep your hair dry and your toaster and everything away from the bar, that will electrocute you. So on the good side of that when you're out in the paddock and need a bit more kickin your electric fence, get the watering can or drum, and water that earth stake, and you'll just help through the ground, in the system, just to complete that circuit.

Shane: That's right and you might not have to put a drum there but if you're there, as we do sometimes – we'll always have water on our vehicle going to the sheds, incase we need to top up if the sheds are getting low, or for some reason they're out of water which happens very rarely – you can just squirt a few litres on the ground at the earth stake, and that will maintain for a couple of days.

Daniel: Excellent. I think we covered quite well, the benefits of temporary [electric chicken fencing](#) vs. [permanent fencing](#). Thank you for your time today Shane.

Shane: You're welcome Daniel.

Daniel: I'm sure listeners will get plenty of insight out of what we have covered today. Thank You.