

Fowler Family

**“Chilwell”
Howick**

East Esperance

Andrew & Marie

Simon & Robyn

Tim & Kath

Richard & Elaine

500 mm GSR

Farming

16,500 ha

Cropping

10,000 ha

Grazing

6,500 ha

Grazing Crops

Lifting Whole Farm Profits at Howick



Andrew Fowler in a canola crop 30 days after grazing. The paddock was grazed with 2300 ewe hoggets & 40 cows and calves for 7 days from 14th – 20th July. This equals 40 DSE/WGH.

THE Fowler family started grazing crops in 2008 as a trial before incorporating into their farming system last year. In 2011 they have cropped 10,000 ha of wheat, barley and canola, of which more than half of that has been grazed.

Andrew Fowler said grazing crops had delivered a major lift in the profit of their operation and that it was one of the best innovations they had implemented on the farm.

“We first tried it to make the pasture phase of our rotation more profitable and comparable with the cropping phase,” Andrew said.

“Previously we were looking at about \$200 to the hectare gross profit which wasn’t much when we compared it to cropping, which was about \$500/ha.

“We needed to lift our stocking rate to increase our return per hectare to make grazing worthwhile, and to help cover some of the fixed costs associated with livestock and maintaining pasture paddocks.”

By using grazing crops, the Fowlers have now managed to lift the pasture phase to \$350/ha gross profit and nearly double their stocking rate from 10 DSE (dry sheep equivalent) to 18 DSE.

Last year they increased their net profit by \$500,000 by growing an extra 1000ha of crop and retaining their livestock numbers.

Grazing crops is a really important tool in matching the supply of feed to livestock demand, and helped the business to harness the synergies between livestock and crops.

“As a result we have had some great benefits with live-weight gains, higher stocking rates, cost savings, crop management advantages and more: all with little impact on crop yields at harvest,” Andrew said.



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**Department of
Agriculture and Food**





BENEFITS

“Grazing crops significantly reduces the levels of disease in **barley** (especially powdery mildew) when compared with ungrazed crops, which eliminates the need for an early fungicide spray,” Andrew said

“In our **canola** crops, the height of the crop is shortened which makes swathing and harvesting a lot easier. Last year the crop height dropped by a foot as a result of grazing.”

Yield and quality are not compromised as a result of grazing. Last year their highest yielding wheat paddock was 4.7 tonnes to the hectare which was grazed and it was the same for canola.

“One grazed canola paddock yielded 2.1 t/ha with excellent quality of 45% oil and 0.6% admixture,” he said.

“An additional benefit is there is a big reduction in the need for extra grain for **supplementary feeding**. We wouldn’t be able to maintain our livestock numbers if we didn’t graze our crops.

“We would have to feedlot the sheep and cattle, or decrease our numbers which would reduce the profitability of our pasture phase which was the main reason for heading down this path in the first place.

The Fowlers have had excellent **liveweight gains** from grazing crops. For sheep they get about 300 grams/head/day and 1.8 kilograms/head/day for cattle.

In 2011, their drop of crossbred Merino White Suffolk lambs only spent five days grazing pasture before the first draft was sold on 8th August at 18.1 kg for \$118 a head. (The rest of their lives were spent grazing crops.) The ewes lambed down in stubble before grazing a barley crop at the three leaf stage. The lambs were weaned at six weeks, the ewes were sold, and the lambs continued to graze crops.

CHALLENGES

Andrew said at the start, the hardest part was to open the gate and let the stock into a good looking crop. But he was amazed how quickly the crop recovered.

Other challenges the Fowlers have faced and, that Andrew stressed, was very important for the system to work, were the **early seeding of crops**, **good weed control** and a **good rotation**. **Ad lib straw** for livestock was also important and **don’t over-graze** the crops (so know your crop growth stages).

CROP STAGES AND MANAGEMENT

Livestock are removed from crops at the first hollow stem (around Zadocks GS 30) in cereals, and with canola leaving a few green leaves, removing the stock when the buds are ~ 10cm high.

“The best results are achieved when you don’t take all the biomass away - you can graze to the white line (when there is no green left) but we have found that the crop is a lot slower to recover if you do this,” Andrew said.

They have found the early sown crops handle grazing well, but the flowering date of the later sown crops is pushed back a bit too far (and the yield affected) without careful grazing.

The Fowlers finish grazing most paddocks by end-July and the latest date is early-August.

After livestock are removed, the Fowlers immediately go in with a Nitrogen (N) application. Once a new leaf has fully emerged, barley crops are sprayed with a broadleaf and powdery mildew spray, and Roundup Ready Canola is sprayed (being careful with withholding periods if crops are to be grazed post-spraying).

The Fowlers admit the big advantage for them is the lack of frost which allows the crops to recover quickly.



PASTURE TIPS

Fowlers continue to strategically rest and graze their pasture paddocks while grazing crops.

“We don’t lock up our pasture paddocks otherwise the cape weed gets away on us,” Andrew said.

“If we continue to use our pastures, we find that it increases the quality and quantity of feed for August when we start fulltime grazing, and the pastures are able to support the higher stocking rate.”