

Lifting lambing percentage using crops

Through the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, a project looking at the practice of grazing winter crops is occurring across northern Victoria. The project aims to increase the knowledge and skills of farmers engaging in, or considering, this practice by providing them with information about suitable crops and varieties, crop agronomy, grazing management and the effects on livestock and crop production.

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Location: Raywood

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 1500 crossbred ewes for second cross lamb production

Crops: wheat, barley, canola, oats, lucerne and vetch

Mean annual rainfall: 450mm

Soil type: red clay loam

Tim and Jodie Demeo have been grazing their pregnant ewes on cereal crops since 2007. They are convinced the practice has helped them increase their lambing percentages and provided them with an opportunity to expand their farm business.

Tim, who has taken part in the Grain & Graze program almost since its inception, said grazing crops stands out as one of the most profitable he has made on his farm since he began to work the land in 1997.

He said winter cereal crops provide his pregnant ewes with the nutrition they need prior to, and following, lambing. In addition, there are benefits for his cropping enterprise; the lower biomass of grazed crops means that trash management is less of an issue.

"It gives you a good feeling to see the sheep on lush green paddocks at this time of year (winter)," Tim said.



The system

In conjunction with grazing crops, Tim operates a drift lambing system. Ewes that have lambed in the last 24 hours are left in the paddock while the rest of the mob (pregnant ewes yet to lamb) is moved onto a fresh cereal crop.

Since implementing this practice, Tim's lambing percentages have risen by about 10 per cent. At the same time, he said his cropping enterprise had not suffered, with no significant change to yields or quality.

"We have never not harvested a crop that has been grazed," Tim said.

"I guess we're trying to have two bites at the cherry, but it's dollars for jam."

The cropping system follows a seven year rotation of wheat, barley, canola, wheat, barley, vetch (hay), oats (hay) and vetch under-sown with lucerne and sub-clover.

About 600ha of the 1100ha farm is cropped with a no-till knife point system and stubble is retained. A further 100ha is dedicated to hay production (vetch and oats) and lucerne and pasture account for the remaining 400ha.

Typically, sowing begins on April 20 (vetch and canola) and finishes on May 20. Barley is the first cereal sown because it produces more biomass for pregnant ewes to graze after shearing in mid June. By then, crops are usually well established and the sheep are hungry.



"Our cropping system is very strategic," Tim said. "Every year one seventh of our pastures are re-sown."

The livestock side of the business comprises 1500 cross bred (Merino x Border Leister) ewes that are crossed with White Suffolk rams for second cross lamb production.

Sheep are supplementary fed (barley) after summer and containment areas are used (briefly) in autumn if necessary.

Tim believes drift lambing complements the system because it allows cereal paddocks to be rotationally grazed, minimising any potential soil compaction or pugging.

Initially 500 pregnant ewes are put in a barley paddock, but most are moved within 48 hours. Only new lambs and their mothers remain at the birth site.

This process continues for the duration of lambing, with ewes moved from paddock to paddock until they lamb.

"It helps limit mis-mothering," Tim said.

On average cereal paddocks are grazed for only 10-14 days. When crops reach GS30 (stem elongation) sheep are removed and crops left to mature.

"They generally just take the top 10cm – about half the biomass," Tim said.

Challenges

While Tim and Jodie endeavour to keep their system as "simple as possible", they concede that grazing crops can complicate some things.

"Top dressing can be a struggle, because we have to wait until we remove our sheep," Tim said.

Spraying is also more complicated with withholding periods (WHP) for grazing livestock a consideration. In fact, it is for this reason that Tim is yet



to attempt grazing canola.

"We plan to graze our TT canola but haven't yet worked out how to juggle the WHPs," he said.

Tim said weed control was a priority and, if need be, some paddocks are not grazed.

"We try to be flexible and have a 'plan B'. We deal with our weeds if they become a problem and, likewise, if paddocks become dusty or sheep are losing condition, we take them out."

Benefits

Tim believes Grain and Graze has provided scope for expansion with crops filling the winter feed gap and providing an opportunity for him to hold onto more stock regardless (to a point) of the seasonal conditions.

Having a diverse system, which includes hay, forage, crops and pasture ensures they always have a back-up plan and aren't forced to sell at less desirable or inopportune times.

As well as improved stock performance and lambing percentages, Tim said the farm benefits from having less stubble to manage.

Drift lambing ensures smaller mob sizes and Tim said grouping animals according to when they gave birth, made record keeping simpler.

And it's not particularly arduous in terms of labour, according to Tim.

"We'd still be checking the lambing ewes every day. They're not hard to shift. We just open the gate and they go into the next paddock. If it was too hard we wouldn't do it."

The future

Perhaps the most exciting thing to come out of the Grain and Graze system is the opportunity it has given Tim and Jodie to expand. In just seven years, they have increased their holdings and stock numbers and they are now aiming to crop 800ha and run 2000 ewes.

"If we can get our efficiencies right, we could expand by up to one third. Of course with livestock it depends on how much you want to work," Tim said.

"(But) We're here to stay and we're sticking with it (grazing crops)."

Find out more

For further information about the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, including opportunities to get involved, contact:

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