



A tenuous leap

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.

Location: Jeffcott

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 750 Merino ewes crossed with Dorset rams to produce prime lambs

Crops: wheat, barley, canola, chickpeas and vetch

Mean annual rainfall: 300-320mm

Soil type: heavy black to hard red

By his own admission Jeffcott farmer Mark Donnellon isn't what you would call a 'lover' of sheep. However, despite his preference for cropping, he sees sheep as a valuable part of his business. As a result he has adopted a system in which sheep graze his Gairdner barley crops to meet their nutritional needs.

Mark, who farms with his wife Angie, re-introduced sheep on to the family farm only about six years ago as a means to combat the resistant ryegrass which had appeared in some paddocks.

"I used to be 100 per cent cropping," he said.

"I started by agisting a few and then I went on to buy my own mob. At the time, lamb prices were good."

But as markets fluctuated, Mark decided to try grazing crops so he could keep his stock when feed was scarce, rather than having to sell them off when lamb prices were not at their best.



"We did it to get through that tight period before the vetch is up and running," he said.

"It allows us to sell when we want to and not when we have to."

The system

Although grazing crops is a practice Mark has implemented with some success, he freely admits that he still has trouble putting stock onto his crops.

"When I first tried it I didn't tell anyone," he said.

"I'd done my research but I still had no confidence in it."

Typically, Mark begins sowing on Anzac day, starting with vetch before moving onto canola, Gairdner barley, wheat, Hindmarsh barley and, lastly, the pulses.

"Half the barley I sow now is Gairdner which I believe is more suited to grazing," he said.

When the Gairdner is well established, Mark allows his stock to graze for about a fortnight, after which the crop is given a boost of nitrogen and locked up.

"Last season we had three mobs graze our three Gairdner paddocks all at once. Once the crops hit the first node stage, the sheep were out and the crops were locked up," Mark said.

Generally, by the time the sheep are removed from the barley crops Mark's vetch is ready for grazing. However, he said he also has containment areas which he can use if the season dictates.



Challenges

For Mark, overcoming the 'fear factor' was the biggest challenge to implementing a grazing crops system on his farm.

"The whole thing is about confidence," he said.

"I don't see myself as an early adopter. I like to do what everyone else is doing.

"Every time I put my sheep on my crops, it feels like a risk. I talk to everyone, have all the info and keep trying to justify why I'm doing it but putting stock on crops just goes against the grain."

In fact, since adopting the practice there have been seasons in which Mark has not implemented it.

"In 2011 we had poor germination so we didn't do it," Mark said.

"Fortunately that year we had an early break and our vetch was up early. That helped us to make the decision."

Concerns about uneven grazing have also perturbed Mark.

"It would be good if they (the sheep) could just take the top off the whole paddock," he said.

Benefits

Despite his concerns, Mark admitted that, in the foreseeable future, grazing crops would continue on his farm.

"The main benefit is that it gives us somewhere to put the sheep," he said.

"I don't think it benefits our cropping enterprise, but neither does it seem to do us any damage."

Mark said having the sheep, and the capacity to feed them throughout the year, was beneficial for the farm



business; as it adds another income stream as well as diversity.

The practice has also contributed to the growth of the farm business.

"We're now running 250 more ewes than we used to," Mark said.

"We've been averaging \$48 for our wool and \$100 for our lambs, so certainly we can't deny increasing sheep numbers had a positive impact."

The future

In the future Mark said he might try grazing another barley variety but he was still reluctant to graze his wheat.

"Barley tends to grow more prostrate and is later to develop a head," he said.

"I might fence an 80 hectare corner of Hindmarsh off (to promote even grazing), graze it heavily and see how it goes."

With an improved understanding of how he could feed them, Mark said sheep would remain on his farm.

"We'll keep the system; it suits us," he said.

As well as adding diversity to the farm, Mark said that as a weed management tool, the sheep were beneficial, particularly where ryegrass was a problem.

"Our system needs some tweaking," he said.

"We have a handle on our cropping side so the plan is to give more attention to the sheep."

"We have operated for many years without sheep so the learning is starting now."

Find out more

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

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