

A flexible farming system

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: Birchip

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 2500 breeding ewes, Poll Dorsets stud, multimeat lambs for breeding (leased) and 2500 lambs

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

Mean annual rainfall: 340mm

Soil type: red clay to loam

Eddie Lee, who runs a mixed family farm with his three sons and son-in-law at Birchip, believes grazing crops benefits both the livestock and cropping parts of his business and allows him to readily adapt to seasonal conditions and market fluctuations.

While it was an exceptionally dry autumn in 2009 that propelled Eddie towards the system, since then the practice has continued and he says they "haven't looked back".

According to Eddie, grazing crops helps to bridge a feed gap between April and the end of July and enables a degree of flexibility that allows the business to respond to the seasons and any peaks and troughs in commodity markets.

"We always wanted our system to be flexible so we can keep up with market trends and change," he said. "That's been our overarching vision for the farm."



It's a vision Eddie said they were continually striving towards. And while he conceded that the process of evolving and adopting a practice such as grazing crops had, at times, been fraught, he had no regrets.

"Grazing crops hasn't hurt us at all."

The system

In a small way, Eddie has been grazing crops for a long time.

"I'd put 50 stud sheep on a 200ha paddock and you wouldn't even know they were there," he said.

But it wasn't until 2009 that the Lee family got serious about grazing crops.

"We had a lot of pregnant sheep and ran out of feed paddocks. They were

starting to get lamb sick. We didn't have an option," Eddie recalled.

Initially, 300 ewes were put on a 100ha barley paddock and after three weeks the crop had been grazed back to 'the white'. The mob was then moved to a neighbouring wheat paddock until the dry spell broke and the farm's grazing paddocks became productive again (about three weeks).

"After three to four days on the barley they were looking magnificent again," Eddie said. "That's when I got serious about grazing crops."

This decision was further justified at harvest time when, yield-wise, there was "nothing out of the normal".

"The crops didn't die and the sheep lived so we were happy," he said.



Over the years the system has become part of the farm's annual livestock management plan, but it alters according to the season, the cropping rotation and the nutrition need.

"We still sow our regular varieties – Yitpi and Correll wheat, Hindmarsh barley and Winteroo oats," Eddie said.

"We let sheep on at the three to four leaf stage, or when the crop can pass the tug test, and take them out before GS30 (stem elongation)."

In all, the crops are grazed for about six weeks and, depending on the class of stock, the sheep are offered supplements such as salt and calcium.

Cereal crops are grazed once, then locked up for grain. Vetch crops can either be treated as a seed or hay crop depending on the season and how much feed is needed.

Over summer, the sheep graze stubble (moved ahead of the seeder). Vetch is sown early (March) so that by the time sowing concludes (June) there are paddocks ready to be grazed.

"If not, they go into containment or our feedlot," Eddie said.

Challenges

According to Eddie, adopting the system wasn't hard.

"It was just the mental thing – making the leap to say, 'Well, we're going to put sheep on a crop'," he said.

Eddie is adamant that in no way does the practice compromise the integrity of his no-till cropping system.

"We try to keep 40 per cent of our ground cover," he said.

"Erosion is a worry, but if it's well monitored it can be controlled.

"You take them (sheep) out if it's going



to blow away. It hasn't been a problem in the last two years."

Benefits

Eddie is convinced the benefits of grazing crops easily outweigh any challenges.

He said as well as overcoming the annual feed and reducing the need for hand feeding, the system had reduced lamb deaths.

"It's a lot better for lambing ewes because they tend to make a nest and stay with their lambs. They're not wandering away looking for food."

Consequently, Eddie said the system had enabled them to run more sheep.

"It's also a risk management tool if crops are failing," he said.

And the practice hasn't harmed the yields or quality of the crops, nor does it seem to contribute to the farm's weed burden.

"It hasn't changed our spraying regime. In fact, we do less weed control, especially in vetch, because when the crop is young the sheep will graze the weeds out," he said.

The future

Eddie said grazing crops has contributed positively to his farm

business, both to its sustainability and its bottom line.

"It feels good," he said.

"There is nothing more exciting than marking time ... seeing all lambs looking healthy and ewes fat.

"Our lambing rate has reached 125 per cent and that's a benchmark we've been aiming at for quite a few years."

In terms of refining the system Eddie said he would continue to work on getting the right cropping mix and, looking to more high fertility ewes, would focus on overcoming the challenges associated with triplets.

"But I'm certain our land will be in a better state than when I got it," he said.

"We plan for it."

Find out more

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

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