

# A system that makes expansion possible

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:** Nullawil

**Farming operation:** cropping and sheep

**Livestock:** 400 Merino ewes plus Poll Dorset lambs

**Crops:** wheat, barley, canola and vetch

**Mean annual rainfall:** 325mm

**Soil type:** sandy loam

Nullawil mixed farmers Dennis and Veronica Ryan have been grazing cereals for the past six years. Recently, they have adopted a more prescribed approach that, in collaboration with other local graziers, endeavours to see Nullawil lambs gain access to premium markets.

Dennis, who is president of the Nullawil BEST WOOL/BEST LAMB (BWBL) group, initiated the project to help farmers in the grain-dominated Mallee increase the profits from their grazing enterprise.

The initiative saw Nullawil BWBL group members purchase a set of electronic scales which, in conjunction with electronic ear tag technology and support from Meat and Livestock Australia, the Victorian DPI and TruTest, is delivering data that can help graziers meet premium market specifications.

"With the technology we can see how our sheep do on crops," Dennis said.

"We used to wean at 15 weeks; now we're doing that at 10 weeks and putting them straight onto the crops.



We're confident to do this because the data confirms they are not going backwards."

The ability to more easily measure each animal's performance has given Dennis the confidence to invest in his livestock enterprise and refine his system further.

"Because we can measure what our (daily) weight gains, are we are getting better at managing our nutrition and preparing our lambs for sale," he said.

The grazing crops system is also beneficial to the cropping side of the business, creating less biomass and fewer trash and blockage issues at harvest and sowing.

Yield-wise Dennis has noticed very little difference between grazed and un-grazed crops.

"Even when they are grazed back to the 'white', if they are locked up before they

reach GS30 (stem elongation), they recover well," Dennis said.

## The system

The Ryans rotationally graze cereals, allowing their weaners on to the crops once the plants can withstand being tugged out of the ground when grazed.

Paddocks used for grazing are normally sown to barley (sometimes wheat) and are split into three 50 hectare sections with solar-powered portable electric fencing. Each section is grazed for up to a week before the stock are moved to the next section. Each paddock generally undergoes three grazings before it is locked up and harvested for grain at the end of the year.

"We always have two paddocks to put our weaner lambs on. They usually need green feed by July," Dennis said.



In all, the Ryans crop about 800ha of their 1100ha farm each year. The rest is sown to vetch (brown manured) and fodder crops such as Moby barley. In 2012 they also grew a small amount of brassica and ryegrass (grazing varieties).

The electronic ear-tag reading technology is a more recent addition with weaners weights recorded via a three-way Prattley drafting race as well as with a walk-over system.

Dennis said the beauty of the solar-powered walk-over system was that it automatically recorded the weights of lambs grazing barley crops every time they used the water trough – without anyone having to be physically present.

In 2011 the Ryans adopted no-till cropping, which Dennis said has constituted a “major change” to the business.

And despite suggestions sheep might compromise some no-till principals, he said stock would remain on his farm.

“The sheep provide diversity. If the cropping season doesn’t go well we always have something up our sleeve.”

To manage both enterprises with limited labour, Dennis endeavours to have his ewes lambing by the first week of April so that sheep work doesn’t interfere with cropping.

## Challenges

Dennis said managing his spraying regime was the biggest challenge to his system. With controlling weeds a priority, selecting what product to use and when to spray was invariably more complicated than it would be on a cropping only farm.

“We have to take into account our stock and any withholding periods that apply. It can make things tricky.



Often we have to change our plans.”

To manage erosion, Dennis limits sheep access to sensitive areas such as sandy hills. Although he would prefer to keep his stubble standing, he values it too much as a feed source to leave it un-grazed.

“It’s a compromise,” he said. “I’d love to save it but it’s worth more to the stock. Having said that, we don’t overstock: we control how long they are on paddocks so they are not eaten out.”

## Benefits

Dennis said he is happy to navigate these issues because the benefits of his system far outweigh any compromises.

Supported by data generated from the technologies adopted, Dennis has developed a system that is heading towards the precision management of sheep under rotational cereal, legume and forage crop grazing.

A Nullawil BWBL project that involves the Ryans’ cereal grazing sheep being weighed at regular intervals is also arming graziers with the knowledge to better manage the nutrient needs of prime lambs and their dams.

At the same time, the practice of grazing cereals is filling the winter feed gap and providing stock with a rising

plain of nutrition.

## The future

With an improved understanding of the grazing potential of crops, Dennis hopes to eventually decrease turn-off times, increase the kilogram per hectare of lamb produced and win access to premium markets.

With electronic ear-tags, the potential for data collection and subsequent improvements to lamb production is limitless.

“We can do things like pedigree match-making and identifying which animals are our best performers.”

Dennis said he was keen to develop the cropping side of his business, identifying how to get the most out of it while continuing to improve the performance and profitability of his sheep.

## Find out more

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

Phone (03)5492 2787, [www.bcg.org.au](http://www.bcg.org.au)

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