

Green feed for longer at Yarrawonga

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: Yarrawonga

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 800 self-replacing Bond ewes

Crops: wheat, barley, canola, milling oats and lupins

Mean annual rainfall: 450-500mm

Soil type: Light sandy loam to red river loam and grey cracking clay

Yarrawonga farmer Peter White freely admits that, in many ways, implementing a grain and graze system on his 1300 hectare cropping and sheep farm has challenged him. However, despite this, he has persevered and is now discovering clear benefits for both enterprises and his farm business as a whole.

Although still relatively new to grain and graze, having first tried it three years ago, Peter said the system was not only delivering an additional sheep feed source, but also providing his pastures with an opportunity to regenerate and easing logistical pressures, particularly at sowing time.

The system

Together with wife Mary-Anne, Peter devotes the bulk of their farm to growing crops including wheat, barley, milling oats, canola and lupins. To support an 800 head self-replacing



Bond ewe flock (kept for wool and meat production), 400ha of pasture and 35ha of forage brassica are also grown.

"The area we sow for hay (oaten) is not fixed," he said. "This year we have 20ha in. We use it as a risk management tool."

August-drop lambs are weaned at 12 weeks before and turned off in mid-March the following year.

After grazing stubbles over summer, with containment areas used when required, the ewes are let into graze Wedgetail wheat once the crop is about 150mm (six inches) high.

"We aim to have them in by the third week of May and off by the first week of

August," Peter said.

Within that time frame, Peter rotationally grazes crops, paddock by paddock, to promote even grazing.

"They (sheep) tend to flog certain areas while the rest goes rank," he said.

"I'm looking at using portable electric fences, which could provide a solution to this."

After the sheep are removed the crop receives an extra dose of nitrogen, depending on the severity of grazing, and if deemed necessary, a fungicide application.

"We're vigilant on rust," Peter said.



Challenges

Marrying experience and instinct with the theory of grain and graze and the research that supports it has, at times, been a struggle for Peter.

"We haven't used it (yet) as well as we could have," he conceded.

Despite following the research closely (he is a committee member of Riverine Plains Inc.), implementing the system in a way that would work on his farm has challenged him.

In particular, deciding when to allow grazing to commence has been something of a conundrum.

"I think we could go earlier," Peter said.

"Perhaps (currently) we let the crop get too big (before grazing).

"The thing that concerns me is if we do graze early but then don't get adequate spring rain after grazing there could be negative consequences in terms of crop yield."

Peter also had questions about the nutritional value of wheat crops, particularly when feeding pregnant ewes.

"I'd like to learn more about how the nutritional value of Wedgetail and understand how it compares to pastures," he said.

According to Peter, a supplement block containing magnesium, salt and calcium, which he uses in conjunction with extra zinc, was a must when grazing crops, as was being aware of the potential for compaction.

"I'm conscious of compaction in cropped paddocks," he said. "If we think it is likely to be an issue in a certain paddock we won't sow Wedgetail there."



Benefits

Regardless of his concerns, Peter said grazing wheat had been a practice worth pursuing.

"Any additional feed you can get makes it worthwhile, but if you can get extra feed (from crops) without a yield penalty, even better," he said.

Adding Wedgetail to the cropping rotation has also facilitated a better spread of the workload, particularly at sowing time.

"You can sow Wedgetail early if the moisture is there," Peter said. "That's a good thing for us logistically."

While Peter believes the yields of grazed cereals are largely dependent on the season (specifically a "good spring"), he suspected that canopy management from grazing sheep had a positive influence on the crop.

A further benefit is that grazing cereals gives his pastures a chance to increase in biomass and nutritional value before sheep are let on them.

Peter said the system essentially gives him more feed, with less hand feeding making it a profitable option.

The practice also contributes towards reducing the farm's risk, allowing him to run more sheep without necessarily increasing his land mass or labour.

The future

Going forward Peter said he would continue to refine his grain and graze system, in the short term focusing on grazing management and timing and educating himself about the nutrient value of cereal crops.

"We will continue to graze crops, and even expand it where our rotation allows, so long as we are able to manage the system's weaknesses and issues," he said.

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

Grain & Graze 2

www.northernvictoriagrainandgraze2.com.au

