

Making the most of the Millewa

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: Wargan

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 400 self-replacing Merino ewes plus 300 Merino ewes crossed with White Suffolk rams for prime lamb production

Crops: wheat, barley, canola, peas, oats (hay)

Mean annual rainfall: 250mm

Soil type: sandy loam to river flats

At Wargan in Victoria's far north west, mixed farmer Matt Curtis is meeting the unique challenges faced by primary producers in the often dry Millewa. With the inclusion of saltbush and dual-purpose wheat varieties on his dryland farm, Matt has devised a system that enables him to meet the nutritional needs of his stock and reduce his business risk along the way.

Seeing the value of livestock for cash flow and risk management, Matt has bucked the local trend of eliminating sheep from his system to focus purely on cropping.

With research and the adoption of some innovative farm practices, he has found that despite an average annual rainfall of just 250mm, there are ways and means to ensure both enterprises are productive and profitable.

Matt said his grazing wheat crops, combined with an expanded Old Man saltbush plantation on some of his non-



productive land, had given him scope to meet the feed demands of his sheep, with significantly less hand feeding.

The system

While cropping remains the predominate enterprise on the Curtis farm (accounting for 2800ha of the 4000ha property), Wedgetail wheat crops are primarily grown to feed sheep.

"Getting a crop off them is a bonus," Matt said.

Wedgetail was first trialed on the farm in 2011 after a very wet summer and Matt found it did very well.

"In 2011 we sowed it early and it went 12 bags, which was the same yield as

our conventional wheat crops," he said.

"We grew it because we had the moisture. It went well so we kept going."

As well as conventional and dual-purpose wheat, Matt grows canola, peas and oats (for hay). This year (2013) vetch was also sown, to bulked up for seed and then added to the rotation (to graze and bale opportunistically).

The farm supports a 400 head self-replacing Merino flock plus 300 Merino ewes that are crossed with White Suffolk rams for prime lamb production.

Sheep are on wheat or salt bush when they lamb and according to Matt the mobs on crops do better and require less supplementary feeding.



Being a long season wheat variety, Wedgetail is sown first and as early as possible if the opportunity is there.

"If we get an early break we can start sowing as early as late March," Matt said. "This helps with sowing logistics."

Sheep – generally pregnant ewes – are permitted to graze the wheat once it reaches about 150mm (six inches) tall.

Once the crop tillers the sheep are usually removed and put on to salt bush or oats. However, taking a "feed first, harvest second" approach, if necessary, stock can be left to graze the wheat beyond tillering until other feed sources become available.

"The system is a bit versatile. That's the beauty of it," Matt said.

"We still run the header over crops that have been grazed beyond the optimum stage, although yields are usually reduced."

Challenges

As a keen supporter of agricultural research in his region, Matt wasn't overwhelmed by new challenges that emerged after he implemented his grain and graze system.

"I'd heard the research (mainly through Mallee Sustainable Farming) and had been to field days so when the opportunity came along, I was happy to give it a go," he said.

"But I still had to get my head around the whole concept of feeding sheep crops. We started small."

While Matt has been encouraged by the outcomes of grazing crops, he conceded the system still needed refining and, in his region, success hinged largely on the season.

"I'm still working out when to take



sheep out and how to manage spraying, although so far I don't think I've suffered any weed issues as a result of adopting the system," he said.

Uneven grazing has been a concern for Matt, particularly in his region where overgrazing can easily lead to soil degradation and erosion.

To combat this he has been experimenting with Rappa portable electric fencing which will make 'rotational grazing' a more feasible option and hopefully eliminate the problems with sheep preferring to stay in one area of the paddock.

Matt said laming management also needed refining with ewes often lambing down right when, according to crop growth stage, they should be removed.

"It can be hard to juggle," he said. "It's something we're trying to fine tune."

Benefits

For Matt, more reliable feed year-round and less hand feeding are the main benefits of the grain and graze system.

"Saltbush takes 12 months to establish and can't be grazed for two years. Crops deliver feed much faster," he said.

The system has allowed Matt to expand his sheep enterprise with

his ewe numbers doubling since its adoption.

"We probably could have increased our numbers with containment areas and salt bush, but not as much," he said.

The future

Looking ahead, Matt is working towards incorporating vetch into the rotation and increasing grazing efficiency and evenness by dividing paddocks with portable electric fencing.

"We're working on ironing out the kinks in the Rappa system," he said.

"We're after a more even graze and better value from our feed by stopping stock from baring out patches while other areas are left to go rank."

Convinced of its benefits, Matt said his grazing crops system would continue to be refined and improved.

"It's helped us so far," he said.

Find out more

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

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Grain & Graze 2

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