

Crops for feed and grain

Through the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, a project looking at how to efficiently convert irrigation water to grain and meat by grazing winter crops is occurring. The project aims to increase the knowledge and skills of farmers engaging in, or considering, grazing crops by providing them with information about varieties, crop agronomy, grazing management and the effects on livestock and crop production.

Location: Normanville
Farming operation: cropping and sheep
Livestock: Merino and first cross ewes
Crops: barley, lucerne, canola and chick peas
Mean annual rainfall: 325mm
Soil type: Mallee loam to heavy clay

Normanville farmers Ron and Deid Schlitz have been able to maintain their grain yield while also grazing their crops.

Ron and Deid started grazing crops during the 2002 drought out of necessity, and are currently grazing Merino and first cross ewes on about 70ha of barley.

Their cropping operation has included canola, chick peas, wheat, barley, oats and lucerne.

"We're also hoping to try corn for double cropping, just as part of trying to remain viable," Deid said.

The farm's Merinos lamb in autumn, while their first cross ewes lamb from about the middle July to mid-August.

The System

Since the 2011 floods Ron and Deid have sown and grazed Urambie barley, finding it recovers well when the sheep are taken off.

Wedgetail wheat has also proven to



be a valuable nutrient source for stock while also yielding well come harvest.

Taking on board learnings garnered through new grazing crops research, Ron and Deid try to make use of any late summer rain to produce cereal crops for grazing.

Deid said wedgetail has been useful in combating a lack of available feed around March/April.

"We are still able to get good feed quality and get grain at the end," she said.

Challenges

Trials endeavouring to strike the best balance between meeting the nutrient requirements of stock while maximising the crop's yield continue for Ron and Deid.

"The growth rate of lambs has varied," Deid said.

"We've also encountered problems with scouring which, research suggests, is due to an imbalance of minerals.

Ron and Deid have the advantage



of being able to irrigate again after grazing.

"That gives us a terrific potential to still get a grain yield, because we've got that advantage of being able to put a couple of inches on ourselves," Deid said.

Last year Ron and Deid left their stock on until late August before locking up the paddock and irrigating.

After harvest stubble is grazed down and kept at a certain level to maintain moisture in the soil.

Benefits

The system has allowed Ron and Deid to think about the long-term viability of their farm.

"Being able to be self-sufficient in feeding our sheep is vital," Deid said.

"It helps us to maintain productivity."

Importantly the system also enhances their return from what Mother Nature does provide.

"With climate variability you have to maximize your benefits from what rain you do get," Deid said.

But she said having an added use for irrigation after grazing crops was also a plus.

"We're improving the environment around our farm and it's helpful to make use of the water available to us," Deid said.

"We are trying to improve the soil... every farmer wants to be custodians of their land."

The future

Deid said that as they continue to



improve their farm layout they are looking to maximize their grain yield while still grazing crops.

"(In the past) we have often compromised grain yields for the sake of stock feed," she said.

"We take it if we do get grain but it's not a necessity."

While Ron and Deid have had problems with rye grass resistance Deid said suitable crop rotations have improved the situation while also motivating a reduced reliance on supplements.

"We've managed to reduce urea and nitrogen inputs," she said.

As they improve their system Ron and Deid are focused on being less affected by climate variability and be able to better manage the cost of production.

Deid said meeting market demands also needed greater attention.

"As an industry we need to focus on what the consumer wants," she said.

While life on the land can be harsh, Deid said improvement was an ongoing process.

"If you stuff up one year you can't do anything about it until the next year," she said.

"But you learn from that."

Find out more

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

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