

Filling The Autumn Feed Gap 2013

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Are you a farmer with a mix of stock and crop for whom current seasonal conditions ratchet up the stress levels with each passing day? Has the late start, cold weather and recent frosts stalled the growth of your sown or self-sown pasture to the point where you're concerned about your sheep losing condition? What is it costing you right now in supplementary feed and sleepless nights?



Photo by Mike Roberts

Chances are you've got some under utilised resources at your fingertips which can help take the pressure down, reduce the costs and maybe even score you a good night's sleep!

If you've got some early sown crops, it is very likely they can be used to fill the feed gap until pastures really kick in later in July. Farmers have often perceived grazing crops for feed as a minefield requiring lots of

Grain and Graze Opportunities throughout the year

Although this publication deals with the immediate opportunity to fill the feed gap by taking pressure off pastures and supplementary feeding by grazing crops, it's worth being aware that Grain and Graze 2 will be bringing you information throughout the year. Watch this space for tips to take advantage of other opportunities resulting from synergies between sheep and cropping enterprises:

- to benefit the crop itself. For example, grazing an early sown crop can help avoid frost damage later in the season by delaying flowering.
- to utilize the feed gap between the end of the pasture season and the time the first stubble is available.
- to use cereal sown specifically for pasture as a valuable cash crop if the rain is adequate in a low rainfall area.
- to feed sheep when adverse seasonal conditions in spring preclude sufficient grain yield due to drought or frost.

technical know-how. As part of its objective to lift farm productivity, the Grain and Graze 2 program can show you that capitalizing on the resources you have is easier than you think.

Does it matter which varieties of cereal I graze?

Sure, there are differences in how different varieties respond to and recover from grazing pressure but the good news for you is that those differences don't need to be taken into account yet. Most of the varieties you are growing will recover very well. Some time in July farmers will be getting messages from Grain and Graze 2 on how variety differences can influence when you should take stock out of various paddocks but for the next few weeks that's likely to be irrelevant.

The important message is that you don't have to suffer this feed shortage any longer. Do something NOW by grabbing the opportunity to



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graze your appropriate crops!

How do I know if the crop is advanced enough to graze?

The most important rule of thumb here is that you don't want the sheep to be able to pull the whole plant out of the ground. Use the old pinch and twist test:

Pinch the top leaves between the thumb and forefinger, pull the leaves upwards while twisting your wrist. If the leaves break off and the plant does not pull out of the ground, the crop can be grazed.

You can test that by hand to get an idea or just put some stock in and see how much damage they do.

Dry matter per ha doesn't matter now

There are lots of complicated formulae around to help you calculate how many kilograms per hectare of dry matter is in the paddock to be grazed and whether that is enough to sustain the various classes of livestock you might want to graze on it and for how long. The reality is that right now it doesn't matter. As long as you can't pull the plants out of the ground you can graze the paddock. It will enable you to get a few days or several weeks of grazing respite for pastures to get away.

When do I take the sheep off the crop?

Assuming a normal spring, there is little risk of a major effect on grain yield from early grazing of cereal crops right up to mid tillering (Growth Stage 22-25). If you graze longer than that, recovery for grain production can be affected. At GS30 the risk of not getting enough grain starts to become a reality. However, this year, very few farmers in SA will be at GS30 prior to the end of July. That leaves ample time to walk the sheep over your cropping paddocks, let pasture feed get away and get the sheep off the crops without significant grain yield impact.

An easy way to monitor the growth stage of the crop your sheep are grazing is to establish a stock exclusion area in a paddock with weldmesh or portable sheep yards. Grazing delays the transition from tillering to stem elongation by a few days so when the main stem on these ungrazed plants begins to elongate as GS30 approaches, the rest of the grazed paddock will not be far behind.

Bill Long, Ag Consulting Co agronomist says: "When stock have been grazing a paddock down pretty hard, just shift them into another paddock. There's no real advantage in calculating feed value at this point. You can tell if they are doing well by keeping an eye on their condition and the amount of supplementary feed you need to provide in a year like this.

Unless you are getting close to GS30 you are not even worrying about the grain, you are just trying to maximise the feed you have right now. Farmers can graze one paddock then another and then shift stock to the paddock first grazed if it is still early enough. Often you can just leave the gate open and sheep will shift themselves to the next ungrazed paddock at the right time on their own."

Withholding Periods for crop chemicals

One cautionary note for farmers intending to sell stock after grazing crops is to know the withholding periods



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for the chemicals they have used. Some of the pre-emergent chemicals have restricted grazing periods when stock destined for slaughter feed on the treated crops. This may override the need to consider the crop stage as the only indicator of when to take stock out.

Weeds – choose clean paddocks

The likely or apparent weed burden in a cropping paddock can affect its suitability as a grazing option. If you have a 'dirty' paddock and you reduce the crop canopy with grazing then there will be less competition from the crop to hold back the weeds.

This year farmers tended to sow most early crops dry or on marginal moisture into paddocks with a low weed burden or where they were confident in the effectiveness of their herbicide of choice. So it is a relatively easy decision to put stock on those paddocks because you would expect they would be clean or have weeds that are easy to control.

It will be the late sown paddocks where you may have been waiting for another germination that you may have only sown in the last week. These late sown paddocks are probably not the ones to graze if you are worried about weeds unless they are easy to control. Pick the clean paddocks that were planted early as the best grazing option.

Canola – a grazing opportunity that can also assist with weed control

Don't ignore the fact that your canola crop may be good feed too. Grazing a weedy cereal crop can give the weeds a boost but it works the opposite way with weeds in the canola. As canola plants grow and spread they tend to shade the weeds below. As the sheep graze the canola they actually open up the canopy and allow for better exposure of target weeds to herbicide control when sprayed after grazing.

So with lots of early canola in this year, there's a great opportunity for filling the feed gap and making weed control more effective at the same time!

Classes of stock

The main thing to keep in mind here is the advisability of moving stock that may be vulnerable to extra stress. So it's not a great idea to keep shifting older ewes in late pregnancy or ewes with lambs on the ground from paddock to paddock. If it's easy to just open a fence and let them through to the adjoining paddock when they spot the better feed on their own, that's fine.

More help?

If you need more information to help you take advantage of Grain and Graze 2 opportunities when you are making decisions along the way please contact your advisor. Be aware though, that Grain and Graze 2 will be publishing important updates and messages throughout the year. Be sure to sign up for posts from our blog site: www.grainandgraze2.com

So in a year like this where stubbles didn't provide the normal level of nutrition, the break was late, your feed reserves are down, you're sick of hand feeding and buying back your feed barley for more than you sold it for at harvest there may just be a golden opportunity staring you in the face right outside your office window! Go graze those crops now!