



*Mixed farmers who are fully stocked up will experience a feed-gap at some time during the year. Grain & Graze 2 spoke with Port Lincoln based livestock consultant Brian Ashton about strategies to deal with times when feed is short.*

## Focus on the Feed-Gap

Written for Grain & Graze 2 by  
Mike Roberts Communications, Research and Consulting

Working with clients who are mainly croppers but who also have sheep as part of their system, Brian says that the most common gap is in the autumn and early winter. Stubbles might run out in March and a feed shortage occurs until the new pastures become established.

Some farmers experience a gap in October as well, just before stubbles become available. It may be the time when they are carrying their maximum stock numbers.

There are two main ways to help minimize the feed-gap. You can adjust the feed demand part of the equation or the feed supply side or both. All farms are different, and farmers have different aims, so exactly how this is done can vary enormously from property to property.



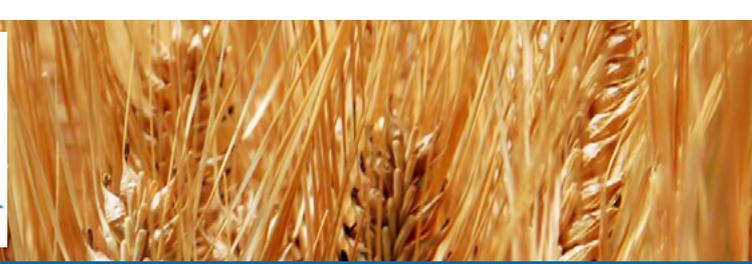
*Brian Ashton (left) and Simon Guerin examine a plot in a grazing cereal trial. This plot has been grazed too hard.*

### The demand side

- People can lower stocking rate, change the time of lambing or calving and change when stock are bought and sold.
- Timing of operations is complex because shearing and marketing need to be spread throughout the year. That means everyone ends up with a different management plan.
- Stock can carry a “haystack” on their backs. In other words, if they are in very good condition this is a great “feed reserve”. If they are poor they need to be built up.
- The Lifetime Wool Project found the target condition scores of ewes at different stages. It’s important to check that your ewes are not too far from the targets. For example, if sheep are above the target and still being hand fed, it is a waste of resources - feed and time.

Brian Ashton says that farmers often think, “we lamb at this time and sell at this time and that’s the way it is.” However, those things can be adjusted. In a tough year, selling sheep early can help to manipulate the demand for feed.

“Many people lamb early, sometimes before the break, and that creates stress which puts pressure on the rest of the season because it means that the pastures are always struggling and so are the sheep. Lambing later can mean that the sheep maintain better condition and the pastures have a chance to get away early.” It is important to balance the ideal time to sell from a market price perspective with the demands on the feed supply. If farmers hang out for the highest price there is often a penalty imposed by having to feed those sheep through a difficult time. “As an example, highest lamb prices often occur in June through to August before new season lambs are available. If farmers are set up to feed those older lambs right through autumn



## Focus on the Feed-Gap

that is fine but if not then it can be a struggle and may not be economic.”

### The supply side

- There is no magic plant that will grow when there is no water. However, you can have a “living haystack” - like saltbush or standing dry feed.
- The years with late breaks, or droughts, are when the feed-gap becomes severe. Obviously, these are also the years when pasture and crop growth is less.
- Better management of existing pastures is a huge opportunity with little risk; pasture production and utilisation, could often be doubled
- With annual pastures the early feed depends on the seed-bank. A high plant population will set up a productive pasture. Therefore, pasture management should aim for a good seed-set.
- Wean at 14 weeks so that ewes can gain more condition before mating.
- Draft weaners, or ewes, into poor and good mobs, if necessary. They can then be managed according to their needs rather than feeding the whole mob.
- Have areas where sheep can be put at the break of the season. This lets the normal pastures get away and means they can build their leaf area to make maximum growth and get “ahead of the sheep”. These areas could be saltbush, puccinellia, perennial veldt grass, sheep containment areas or even agistment.
- Non-arable areas that are part of cropping paddocks can't be used once the crop is sown. However, if they are fenced off they could be used at the break of the season.
- Other options are
  - Sow crops especially for early stock feed. They can be reaped or baled in good years.
  - Sow crops for use as standing crops which can be grazed when mature.
  - Use specific pastures, such as Italian Ryegrass, for high quality feed.
  - Graze your normal grain crops.
  - In good years make silage.
  - Sow a perennial pasture like Kikuyu, Phalaris, Sulla or lucerne.



*A farmer group in a pasture at Edillilie*

A farmer on lower Yorke Peninsula has an area of ‘really gutless sand’ and has great difficulty getting anything to grow successfully there, despite reasonable rainfall. The plan is to sow kikuyu as a feed source and as ground cover. In a more productive area Brian says there may be better options but is hopeful this will work for this farmer.

Standing crops, allowed to go to head and then grazed, had been used for years but fell out of favour. Brian Ashton thinks they are worth another look. “Weaners can be put onto a standing crop when the feed gap occurs in October or through the summer. In a good year you have the option to bale or reap it. One client has a small area (15ha) of Matika oats he uses in this way as it has a higher feed value than other oat

## Focus on the Feed-Gap

varieties. He will put 500 Merino lambs into it after Christmas and expects feed to last for eight weeks. They may stay in there after that, with hand feeding. Next year a mass of oats will germinate. It's so easy".



*A common mistake is to graze cereals too late as in this photo. Stock should be removed before GS31.*

Moby barley, which has excellent early vigour and provides good grazing for stock while pastures are allowed to get away.

One of the barriers Brian sees to focusing on the feed gaps, and other important stock issues is farmer attitude to stock. "I find that with cropping people are always looking for that edge and trying new technology. They are really pushing the cropping system. But when it comes to stock, they tend not to want to change anything because they fear that it could "upset the apple cart" for little reward.

His advice is to "pick something you think will be the best opportunity to fill your feed gap and give it a 'red hot go'. That means almost overdoing it initially to give it the best chance of working. Don't try it 'half-heartedly' because that could give you the wrong answer. If you can make it work, it might make all the difference to your livestock business." That, in turn, could change the contribution stock make to whole farm profitability.

*Grain & Graze 2* would like to thank Brian Ashton for his contribution to this article including the photographs provided. For more information:

Brian Ashton  
Sheep Consultancy Service Pty Ltd  
08 8682 2817 Mob 0438 088 220  
[ashtonba@gmail.com](mailto:ashtonba@gmail.com)  
[www.sheepconsultancy.com.au](http://www.sheepconsultancy.com.au)

Grazing normal crops is an option with huge opportunity in areas that have favourable spring conditions. "If you normally get a reasonably good spring you can graze your crops without penalty in terms of grain yield and so it's just a bonus."

Asked about variety selection at planting if early grazing was a likely option, Brian thinks, "if you are going to have a crop, it has to be the best crop for the rotation and the business. Focus on the rotation from the cropping point of view and the grazing is a bonus - in most cases". Having said that, a farmer on Yorke Peninsula has had success growing

grazing for stock while pastures are allowed to get away.

One of the barriers Brian sees to focusing on the feed gaps, and other important stock issues is farmer attitude to stock. "I find that with cropping people are always looking for that edge and trying new technology. They are really pushing the cropping system. But when it comes to stock, they tend not to want to change anything because they fear that it could "upset the apple cart" for little reward.

His advice is to "pick something you think will be the best opportunity to fill your feed gap and give it a 'red hot go'. That means almost overdoing it initially to give it the best chance of working. Don't try it 'half-heartedly' because that could give you the wrong answer. If you can make it work, it might make all the difference to your livestock business." That, in turn, could change the contribution stock make to whole farm profitability.

*Grain & Graze 2* would like to thank Brian Ashton for his contribution to this article including the photographs provided. For more information:

Brian Ashton  
Sheep Consultancy Service Pty Ltd  
08 8682 2817 Mob 0438 088 220  
[ashtonba@gmail.com](mailto:ashtonba@gmail.com)  
[www.sheepconsultancy.com.au](http://www.sheepconsultancy.com.au)