Grain & Grazing - The Best of Both Worlds

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Dual purpose cereals - as distinct from the specialist "grazing" or grain varieties - are helping the Caithness family of Bairnsdale successfully run cattle in a district traditionally considered a wool growing area.

According to Trevor Caithness, the family has been planting cereals "early" - in February or March - for five years now, confidently expecting between 2000 and 3000 kilograms of dry matter per hectare available through autumn and early winter.

And he says they're not chasing markets for high quality wheat. Why would they when Gippsland needs up to 700,000 tonnes of feed grain a year and would struggle to supply 10 to 15 per cent of that figure?

They plant high yielding "barn fillers" like the winter red wheat Rudd, Amarok and Marombi and keep an eye on trials by the local Southern Farming Systems cropping group of new commercial lines, New Zealand varieties and potential new lines from CSIRO.

"We start to graze those paddocks in April and stock them through to late July or early August, growth stage 32, stem elongation," Mr Caithness says.

"Then we take the cattle out, shut the gate, apply urea or fowl manure and let the paddocks regrow for a grain harvest.

"But we rarely take the whole planted area through to grain harvest.

"While we like to retain 20 per cent or so of our grain to use in our own small feedlot and then sell the balance, before we strip any paddock for grain we make sure we have 1000 tonnes of whole crop silage in the pit by mid-December.

"We tend to look for areas that might have ryegrass that has got away for silage, because with the bank of naturalised clover that is always there, we can make a quality product that averages metabolisable energy of 10.5 and protein of 9.8 per cent.

"We also bale all our stubble straw, which may seem hard on our country, but with adequate applications of phosphorus, potash, lime and fowl manure, soil fertility is still increasing."

The Caithness farm results with grazing grain cereals tend to confirm research conducted for the Grain & Graze and National Landcare Programs, which suggests there's a substantial and untapped store of early winter grazing in paddocks of wheat, barley and triticale sown for grain.

A trial near Geelong in 2006, led by Grain & Graze Corangamite/Glenelg Hopkins regional co-ordinator Cam Nicholson, showed grazing Yerong barley at the vegetative growth stages.
- up to stem elongation:
  - had no adverse effect on eventual grain yield and even improved yield slightly;
  - reduced stubble levels slightly, promising easier sowing in the following season, and
  - reduced the need to graze new or re-germinating legume pastures in early winter.

Grazing at or after the start of stem elongation provided more dry matter for livestock, and dramatically decreased stubble loads, but came at significant loss of grain yield.

Mr Caithness, a 2002 Nuffield Scholar, has been involved with Grain & Graze through the program's support of cereal grazing trials by the Gippsland branch of Southern Farming Systems, of which he is the current chairman.

The branch has a 10 hectare site near the Bairnsdale airport which it has used for trials of grazing cereals.

The Caithness family purchased 270 hectare in Kintore in 1999 and have bought another 300 hectares since then. They also lease 1000 hectares of breeding country 100 kilometres north in the Tambo Valley.

Mr Caithness says the Bairnsdale district has traditionally been considered wool growing country because of its combination of light soils and rainfall pattern - where seasons finish early, leading to long, extended summers.

"It was probably what I saw on the Nuffield Scholarship more than anything that made me realise this dryland country in east Gippsland was capable of more than just profitable wool growing," he says.

"The area has a long term rainfall average of around 650mm - with a reputation for 55mm falling in every month of the year - but it's been a long time, maybe 13 years since we've seen that.

"On Kintore we try for a 50/50 split of cropping and grazing, aiming for a three year rotation of canola, wheat and barley, though that's not set in concrete.

"We are looking for a summer legume that can be planted into country that had silage taken off in late spring before we go back into the winter cropping program.

"Thanks to a good fertiliser program over the years we can look forward to very productive clover, ryegrass and cocksfoot pasture in paddocks coming out of cropping."