Eating His Grain and Keeping it Too

18 April 2007

Producer's name: Mick Shawcross
Location: Ceres, VIC (near Geelong)
Property area: 160ha
Enterprise: Cropping and sheep (crossbred ewes and Dorset sires)
Producer's goals: Better lamb production competing for the highest value lambs for both export and domestic markets
Number of livestock: 800 crossbred ewes
Pastures/crop: Barley, legume pastures
Soil types: Medium to heavy clay, acid pH of 4.5/5.0
Rainfall: 480 - 530ml per annum (355ml during trial year)

Key points:

1. Grazing barley at the vegetative growth stages - up to stem elongation improved yield slightly, as well as reducing stubble levels slightly, promising easier sowing in the following season, and reducing the need to graze new or re-germinating legume pastures in early winter.
2. Lambing is in June and July so the Shawcross family wanted to boost the condition of their ewes prior to lambing by grazing them on Yerong barley as a good replacement for the Cape variety traditionally used in the district for winter feed.
3. The aim is to get four to six weeks grazing from the annual planting of barley, in the colder part of the year, when there is not much pasture growth, before shutting the paddock to let the barley grow on for a grain harvest.
4. The grain is used to boost ewe condition, usually 200 grams a day per ewe for a month, when they are grazing stubble before lambing, and at other times of the year when paddock feed might be in short supply.

Prime lamb producer Mick Shawcross will plant, graze and harvest dual-purpose barley on his farm again this winter.

A research trial on his farm last year showed that grazing barley at the vegetative growth stages - up to stem elongation - had no adverse effect on eventual grain yield (barley variety Yerong).

The research, supported by the Grain & Graze and Landcare programs, found that using dual-purpose barley in this way even improved yield slightly, as well as reducing stubble levels slightly, promising easier sowing in the following season, and reducing the need to graze new or re-germinating legume pastures in early winter.

Prime lambs are what the Shawcross family are all about on their 160 hectare property at Ceres, near Geelong, where they join 800 crossbred ewes to Dorset sires, having experimented briefly with East Friesian and White Suffolk rams before returning to their
Mr Shawcross is a member of the 30 or so strong Barwon Prime Lamb Group which, in its quest for ever better lamb production, holds an annual Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) sponsored carcass competition for the highest value lambs in the domestic and export categories.

For pens of five lambs, the competition is held annually at Colac, with additional support from the local show society, Coles and Victoria's Department of Primary Industries.

Lambing in June and July - with "a few in spring" - Mr Shawcross says he worked with the Grain & Graze/Landcare trial in the hope that Yerong barley would be a good replacement for the Cape variety traditionally used in the district for winter feed.

"Cape is a very old variety and a very aggressive grower but with some husk discoloration that worried the grain industry because of its potential to contaminate malting quality barley," Mr Shawcross said.

"A few members of the Prime Lamb Group from Ballarat had heard about Yerong doing well in trials in NSW and we thought that, if it did well, it would be a benefit to the grain industry to stop planting Cape.

"We compared Yerong and Cape in 2005 and concluded that Yerong was just as good overall - better in some areas, not in others."

Grain & Graze Corangamite/Glenelg Hopkins regional co-ordinator Cam Nicholson carried out the trial on the Shawcross property.

Grain & Graze is a collaborative partnership between Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) and Land & Water Australia (LWA) aiming to help mixed farmers increase their profitability and simultaneously better manage natural resources.

The trial was carried out on a 10.4 hectare paddock which was stocked with 56 first cross ewes with 114 per cent lambs at foot and grazed for 47 days at an average stocking rate of 19.4 dry sheep equivalents per hectare (DSE/ha) over the grazing period, or 2.5 DSE/ha over the entire year.

Carried on for grain, the parts of the paddock grazed before growth stage 30 (stem elongation), out-yielded the ungrazed, control areas as well as reducing stubble levels slightly, promising easier sowing in the following season.

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 Nicholson said for a typical farm in South West Victoria, with an average stocking rate of 15.8 DSEs per hectare over a year, the extra grazing provided by the system represented 16
per cent of total feed requirement for the year and was provided at a time of year when feed is in short supply."

Mr Shawcross said he looked to get four to six weeks grazing from his annual planting of barley, in the colder part of the year, when there was not much pasture growth anyway, before shutting the paddock to let the barley grow on for a grain harvest.

The grain was used to boost ewe condition, usually 200 grams or so a day per ewe for a month, when they were grazing stubble before lambing, and at other times of the year when paddock feed might be in short supply.

"The system lets us boost condition in the ewes before lambing, keep their lambs growing during the colder months of the year, when there isn't much other feed around, and lets the grass/legume pastures get away," Mr Shawcross said.

"The longer you can keep the stock off pastures at that time of the year, the better."

Mr Shawcross and Mr Nicholson both stress the need to remove the stock from the crop before it reaches growth stage 30 if grain production is paramount.

Mr Nicholson says identification of growth stages can be difficult for many farmers but Mr Shawcross believes most should be able to master the process after 15 or 20 minutes of demonstration.