David Kingston is pretty happy with his cropping operations on "Yarrawah" The Rock, south west of Wagga Wagga, but is keen to improve the way he runs his sheep.

He wants to reduce fleece microns in his Merino flock and particularly reduce the time it takes him to turn off his lambs.

His Merino ewes were joined in equal numbers to Merino and Dorset sires in 2006 - a tough year - the Dorset mated ewes lambed at 120 per cent and the pure Merinos at 96 per cent.

Mr Kingston feels most of that difference can be put down to available feed in the paddock, with the Dorset line getting the better run on what grazing wheats were available in the dry year.

"The Dorsets mightn't have quite got to 120 per cent if the Merinos had been given the better run of feed, but they would have gone close," he said.

"The Murrumbidgee Grain & Graze project team is monitoring what we do in the paddock, in particular the value of grazing wheats in the farming system, and whether they perform better on our heavier soils, but the trouble in recent years have been the late seasonal breaks.

"We like grazing rotationally, and like to be able to put high numbers of sheep on a paddock of grazing wheats for a month or six weeks to give the other paddocks the chance to get away, but to do that we need those early breaks.

"In 2005 we got a couple of weeks grazing on the wheat and even this year, when we put 700 single lambing ewes on an 80 hectare paddock for only a week, we gave other pasture paddocks a short spell."

"Yarrawah" is one of five "Focus Farms" under study in a joint initiative between the Murrumbidgee Grain & Graze project and Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority's (MCMA) Best Management Practices for Dryland Cropping project.

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).

The Focus Farm initiative is funded by the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality through the Murrumbidgee CMA.

Monthly monitoring of the Focus Farms provides an overview of the feed production cycle on a whole farm basis and how this impacts on environmental indicators such as water use, ground cover and biodiversity.
Five paddocks on each farm - representing typical, mixed farming components of annual pasture, perennial pasture with lucerne, native pasture/remnant vegetation, grazing cereal and grain only cereal - are monitored.

Mr Kingston says the family operation is some 70 per cent based on cropping - wheat, barley, canola and "an occasional triticale" with the barley undersown to pastures of clovers, lucerne and chicory which Mr Kingston likes to put back into crop after three or four years.

Soils range from a heavy clay - which makes up about 30 per cent of the property - though red clay loam, at about 60 per cent of the place - with the remainder being light granite.

NSW Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries agronomist Craig Muir says soil monitoring on the five Grain & Graze Focus Farms has identified regionally important characteristics of agricultural soils and has the potential to quantify the impacts of mixed farming systems on soil water and recharge. It also supports the Biodiversity in Grain & Graze (BiGG) work being carried out by Sheila de Lange from the Murrumbidgee CMA on the Focus Farms.

"The big push in the Murrumbidgee is grazing wheats, because in this environment we expect a feed gap in May, June and July, through to early August and our interest is in their potential in mixed farming systems more traditionally based on lucerne/cropping rotations," Mr Muir said.

"Cereals have higher winter growth rates along with higher feed quality, and we know the crop can recover so we get the best of both worlds when we use them for grazing as long as it rains afterwards!"

"Each month we distribute Focus Farm Facts, with data from our monitoring of soil water and pasture production, and that helps farmers manage fodder and livestock throughout the year."