



MEDIA RELEASE

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The Benefits of Grazing Crops with Twin Bearing Ewes

There has been a push over the last few years to get sheep farmers to adopt pregnancy scanning for multiple bearing ewes rather than just “wet and dry”. While many farmers have adopted this practice, the full benefits only appear when the twin bearing ewes are separated from the single bearing ewes and fed according to their requirements.

Ideally the twin bearing ewes will be lambed in smaller mobs of 150 to 250 ewes. This can be problematic for some growers who do not have enough small paddocks to accommodate all the small mobs.

Two Grain & Graze funded trials in 2015 looked at the feasibility of running twin bearing ewes on crop paddocks at low (2 to 3DSE/ha) stocking rates during lambing.

Ben Zadow of Kojonup sowed a 53ha paddock to Bannister Oats on May 20. Due to the presence of trees and rocks, only 46ha was actually sown. On June 25, when the crop was at the 3 leaf stage and a few days before lambing was due to commence, 50 twin bearing ewes with an average condition score of 3.1 were placed on to the crop. They stayed on the crop until July 24, when Ben’s crop agronomist suggested they be moved to a neighbouring paddock to reduce the risk of a yield penalty.

Three of the ewes were fitted with GPS tracking collars while grazing the crop. The data showed that the ewes spent the vast majority of their time grazing the top half of the paddock, leaving the bottom half of the paddock largely untouched. This suggests that, even though the crop was short, feed intake of the ewes was not being limited. The condition score of the ewes at lamb marking on August 19 confirmed this, as it had increased from 3.1 pre-lambing to 3.3 post-lambing. This is impressive given most twin bearing ewes lose condition during late pregnancy and early lactation.

At the same time, Ben ran 63 twin bearing ewes (the other half of the original mob) on 24ha of pasture during lambing. It was a short but dense annual pasture with a FOO of 1500kg/ha on June 30. These ewes lost weight, with their condition score dropping from 3.1 pre-lambing to 2.7 post-lambing.

Lamb marking percentages differed between the two mobs, with the crop grazing mob at 143% and the pasture mob at 155%. It is not clear what caused this difference, but given the crop grazing mob were moved to another paddock just prior to the end of lambing, this may have had a negative impact.

The Bannister Oat crop went on to yield the same as an adjoining ungrazed paddock sown on the same day, so Ben was fairly confident that grazing did not significantly reduce grain yield.



The Walebing twin bearing ewes that grazed pasture and were supplemented with pellets



The Walebing twin bearing ewes that grazed crops and weren't supplemented

In Walebing, Michael Humphrey sowed a 140ha paddock to Scope Barley in early May. The paddock contained a small area of trees and salt land. On June 23, when the crop was at the early tillering stage and a few weeks before lambing was due to commence, 178 twin bearing ewes with an average condition score of 2.4 were placed on to the crop. They stayed on the crop until August 5, when they had finished lambing.

The Scope barley crop had a FOO of 384kg/ha when the ewes entered the paddock. Although this doesn't sound much, the upright nature of the crop ensured animal intake was high. Feed quality testing revealed the crop was very high in both energy (13.6MJ/kg) and crude protein (39%). This combination of high feed quality and high feed availability saw the ewes increase in condition score from 2.4 pre-lambing to 2.9 post-lambing.

At the same time, Michael ran 95 twin bearing ewes (the other half of the original mob) on 19ha of pasture during lambing. Due to the very tough season, the FOO of the ryegrass dominant pasture was only 185kg/ha on June 23. The ewes were supplemented with 600g/hd/day of EasyOne pellets both prior to and during lambing. Feed testing showed the pasture contained 10.5MJ/kg of energy and 27% crude protein, both significantly less than the crop. The ewes on pasture went from condition score 2.5 pre-lambing to 2.6 post-lambing.

The lamb marking percentages differed between the 2 mobs, with the crop grazing mob at 141% and the pasture mob at 154%. It is not clear what caused this difference.

A small area of the Scope barley crop was fenced off and left un-grazed so the impact of grazing on grain yield could be determined. Using the DAFWA weigh trailer, cuts at harvest were taken and revealed no impact from grazing with both sections yielding a handy 3.3t/ha in such a dry season.



These two trials produced remarkably similar results. The major advantage of grazing twin bearing ewes on crops was a significant increase in condition score relative to ewes grazing on pasture. Is it fair to suggest that this advantage will be larger in tough pasture years such as 2015, and smaller in years when pastures are thriving? We hope to find out with further trials in 2016.

The other major advantage is being able to defer some pastures for 4 to 6 weeks in mid-winter. This would increase FOO and enable higher lamb growth rates when the ewes and lambs return from grazing crops.

There are some unanswered questions around lamb survival when lambing ewes on crops. Do the sudden changes in diet when sheep transition back and forth between crop and pasture have an impact? Do cereal crops induce subclinical metabolic disorders due to marginal levels of calcium, magnesium or sodium? Is mis-mothering an issue if the crop is sprayed or fertilised when the ewes are on the crop or when the ewes and lambs are moved off the crop?

Despite the uncertainty around some of these issues, both Ben Zadow and Michael Humphrey plan to lamb down their twin bearing ewes on crops in 2016. Stay tuned for updates.



A part of the Walebing barley crop that was moderately grazed by the twin bearing ewes
Grazed (left) vs Ungrazed (right)



A part of the Walebing barley crop that was only very lightly grazed by the twin bearing ewes. Grazed (right) vs ungrazed (left).

More information

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