Increase stock density by increasing crop area

Article by Richard Quinlan, Planfarm

Farm info.

Grower: Kristin and Tracy Lefroy

Location: 'Cranmore', Moora

Soil type: Sandy loams and clay loams

Property size: 5700 ha

Ave annual rainfall: 400 mm

Enterprise mix for 2013: 70% crop, 30% cattle and sheep.

Even sheep studs are moving to high crop percentages, but this doesn't have to come at the expense of the grazing enterprise.

Kristin and Tracy Lefroy of Cranmore Farming are planning to grow 3700ha of barley, wheat and canola in 2013. Cranmore Farming is situated in the picturesque Miling district approximately 20km east of Moora, Western Australia. "Barley is the best crop as it tends to yield 500kg/ha better than wheat, no matter what the yield is," says Kristin. "For us it works the best, but canola is becoming increasingly important due to the weed control options it has." They crop 70% of the farm despite running 4000 ewes and 150 cattle. However things haven't always been like this.

More crop, but not to the detriment of sheep numbers

In the past, a cropping percentage of 20% was considered the norm for Cranmore Farming. "Rocky outcrops and low lying creeks mean that the grazing side of the enterprise will always be important," Kristin says. Over the last 10 years the cropping area has risen significantly, however this hasn't necessarily come at the expense of the grazing enterprise. We have been able to increase our stocking rate through the help of the cropping business. "While participating in the Sheeps Back program a number of

ABOVE AND INSET: Grazed and ungrazed sections of the Mace wheat crop on the day stock were removed. Photo taken 10 July 2012.

years ago, it became evident that people with higher cropping percentages were able to reduce their hand feeding costs. The stubbles were able to supply some of the roughage the animals required in autumn," notes Kristin.

Through the better use of stubbles and better grazing management Cranmore was able to lift their carrying capacity to 9DSE+. The planting of saltbush on the river flats has also helped achieve this by reducing the autumn feed gap. The droughts over the last five years have reduced this back to 7.5 DSE, but Kristin is confident he can lift this back up to 9DSE or above by better management of his grazing systems. He is still unsure where cattle fit into his grazing enterprise. They do work better on the rocky country but fence maintenance and handling issues do create more work. "For the moment they are staying," he comments.

New management techniques to get more from the system

However, if you do what you have always done you will get what you have always got, so Kristin is looking for new management techniques to turn 9DSE or greater into a reality.

One technique he trialled last year was grazing some of his cropping program early in the season to take the pressure off his emerging pastures.

Kristin has seen real benefits in grazing crops, as they allow pasture paddocks to be spelled early in the season. "Even one week spelling a pasture can make the difference between a performing pasture and a non performing pasture."

In 2012, as part of the Grain & Graze II program, Kristin grazed a number of wheat paddocks to assess how the technique would work on his farm. One of the grazed paddocks was 63ha and was compared to a similar paddock next door that had similar seeding date and fertiliser and chemical regime, that wasn't grazed.

The sheep and cattle were moved into the paddock on the 3rd July when the crop was at the 3.5 leaf stage and removed on the 10th July. The paddock was grazed early and lightly which is the key. At harvest time there was no visual effects from grazing them.

The results showed that grazing his wheat crops early in the season resulted in little or no yield penalty (i.e. less than 100kg/ha yield penalty). It allowed Kristin to spell his pasture paddocks so they could recover and grow. The paddock in question was grazed with 70 cows and calves and 250 dry ewes to give a total of 137DSE grazing days/ha. This equated to a grazing value of $15.50/ha. Although this is not a big saving, the true value came in allowing him to spell his pasture paddocks. "The start of the season was dry last year and the pasture paddocks suffered. By taking the pressure off these paddocks they performed well. This is the real value of grazing crops," says Kristin.

So what does the future hold for Cranmore?

"We are happy with our cropping percentage. If anything we will increase stock numbers without increasing pasture area through better crop and pasture integration," says Kristin. "We will continue to experiment with grazing crops and possibly include grazing canola".