

Grazing crops well established in mixed farming system

Article by Sam Taylor, agVivo

“I graze crops because it improves farm profit,” is what West Pingelly farmer Kane Page says when people ask him why he grazes crops on his property ‘Walwalling’.

Kane sees debt as the biggest factor that requires him to drive production on his property, and grazing crops allows overall farm production to be lifted. The stocking rate is maintained at between 14 and 17 DSE per winter grazed hectare because of crop grazing. Increasing production allows him to increase turnover, providing better cash flow which allows improved debt servicing.

Crop grazing for the first time

Kane’s first experience of grazing crops was an oat crop several years ago. 430 ewes with lambs at foot were placed on a 25 ha oat crop in a very wet year. This initial crop grazing experience had a major impact on both disease and insect pressure in the crop. The levels of aphids were building in the crop and starting to cause damage. Grazing opened the canopy up and significantly reduced the levels of aphids found in the crop. Septoria levels also built up in ungrazed crops and this had a significant impact on yield, with the grazed crops yielding approximately 2 T/ha more than

the ungrazed crops due to the reduced impact of septoria and aphids.

Since that time, Kane has grazed his wheat crops for many years. Initially, he used dual purpose winter wheat varieties such as Wedgetail, but found that he could graze his regular spring varieties, including Wyalkatchem, Calinigiri, Magenta and Mace just as successfully. Grazing these spring wheats is seen as a strategy to help manage the frost risk on susceptible areas of the property, as well as picking up the disease and insect management benefits he discovered in the oat crop in the first year of crop grazing. Kane also found that the reduced crop height of the grazed crops made for easier stubble management the following seeding.

In 2012, Kane grazed canola for the first time. Like many other farmers, Kane found that when sheep were introduced to the canola, they roamed the paddock eating all of the weeds along fence-lines and banks, around rock piles and under trees before they took to the crop.

Farm info.

Grower: Kane and Bec Page

Location: West Pingelly

Property size: 2145 ha farmed

Ave annual rainfall: 425 mm average (winter dominant)

Soil type: 10% light loam, 70% medium loam, 20% heavy red country

Enterprise mix: 25% of land farmed as stock pasture, 75% crop



Sheep management when grazing crops

The sheep flock consists of 2700 ewes and 1500 ewe hoggets. The ewes lamb in July, and unless there is a good early break to the season, which is not always reliable, winter feed becomes very tight as feed demand increases during late pregnancy and early lactation. The ewe hoggets do most of the crop grazing in the 570 hectare cropping program. These lighter stock appear to do less trampling damage to the crops and utilise a higher percentage of the dry matter on offer. Moving the hoggets onto the crop increases the amount of pasture available for the ewes.

A stud breeding program is also in place on the property, and this involves a large single sire mating program. Having the confidence to graze crops allows crop paddocks to be utilised, easing the management of the mating program.

Kane has not observed any significant amounts of scouring, or other adverse

A wheat crop ready to be grazed in early July 2011

animal health impacts when sheep have been grazing crops, but he admits he does keep a close eye on the stock when first introducing them. "I always make sure that the sheep are not hungry when they are introduced to the crops, and that there is adequate fibre available to ensure rumen function remains optimal," Kane says. Straw bales are often placed in the corner of paddocks if required, and often the residual stubble from last years crop provides enough fibre.

Cereal crops that are grazed help to provide supplementary feed at a time when feed demand is increasing and pasture growth rates are often quite low. Grazing crops allow some pasture paddocks to be rested and to accumulate feed. This extra feed is then utilised when sheep are taken off the crops around the end of July or at Growth Stage Z30.

Lessons learnt along the way

Additional nitrogen fertiliser is applied to crops which are grazed, with up to 50 L/ha of Flexi N applied at seeding on grazing paddocks. This is the only major difference in fertiliser management

between grazed and ungrazed crops.

Once grazed, Kane believes that the recovery time is important and he likes to leave at least one full leaf on the plants. This enables faster crop recovery, better competition against any weeds present, and possibly the opportunity for a second grazing.

There have been some lessons learnt along the way though. Kane will now only graze crops that are clean of grass weeds. When crops that contained a level of grass weeds were grazed, the weed burden was made worse, and this had a negative impact on the crop. The crop rotation is not entirely fixed, generally being canola, wheat, wheat and returning to pasture once the wheat crops become too grassy.

Paddocks that are grazed will be those that are more susceptible to frost, or towards the end of the cropping rotation, so if grass weeds do become problematic, they are managed in the pasture phase.

Plans for the future

Over the last few years, Kane has

welcomed many farmers to his property to look over his crop grazing program, but he cannot believe how few farmers have taken it up for themselves. While Kane has had some negative experience in relation to crop yields and learnt some hard lessons in terms of weed management, he sees crop grazing as a calculated risk, which based on nearly ten years of experience, has increased gross margin per paddock and overall farm profitability.

For Kane, grazing crops is now well established as part of the standard operating procedure on the property, and will continue to be used as a means of maximising resource efficiency. By maintaining a flexible approach to meet the requirements of the sheep flock, and knowing the risks associated with crop grazing, such as grazing too hard or too late, crop grazing has improved the production and profitability of both the livestock and cropping enterprises. ✓



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