



THE SHEEP'S BACK

Autumn 2015

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In March this year, The Sheep's Back ran a series of workshops primarily focused on pasture, specifically how to grow a better quality of pasture and more of it.

This was presented by consultant Paul Omodei and we were also lucky enough to have growers from around the State share with us their own on farm experiences. An integral part of these presentations was pasture manipulation as we move into the growing season.

I think it's a good time to review this topic and discuss the pros and cons of investing in pasture quality from a sheep, crop and whole farm perspective.

To set the scene, pasture manipulation is the 'art' of utilising chemicals and/or grazing pressure to remove unproductive grasses and broadleaf weeds and allow the remaining legumes to flourish. This means at some stage wiping out the majority of the competition to make room for clover.

What are the benefits to the business?

1) Sheep Benefits

Sheep will gain weight faster, grow more wool and produce more milk when grazing legume pastures compared to grass pastures of the same pasture quantity.

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This results in:

- Heavier weaners;
- Increased weaner survival;
- Lambs sold earlier or heavier;
- Ewes in better condition going into summer (thus better conception rates in the following season).

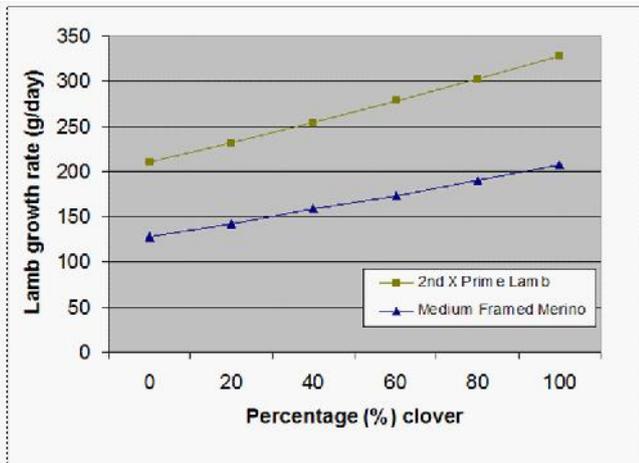


Table 1: The relationship between increased clover content in a pasture and weight gain in 3 month old Merino and 2nd X prime lamb wether weaners, grazing 1000 kg FOO at 75% digestibility. This prediction was formulated using Grazfeed®. (Source: RIST High Performance Weaners manual)

In-season pasture manipulation (primarily of barley grass) allows for spray topping to be deferred until later and for some, not to be required at all. This allows for the growing season to be extended and for the pre-harvest feed gap to be avoided or shortened.

Many growers suggest this is the toughest sheep management period of the year and when they sometimes ‘drop the ball’. Clover burr or legume pod are excellent and underrated summer feed that provides a high protein supplement that assists with digestion of lower quality dry grasses and stubbles. It is also not affected by rain unless it germinates. Depending on the rota-

tion, well managed clovers can return from 2-3 years of crop without the need for reseeding.



Ryegrass may well have built up resistance to some grass selectives such as ‘Targa’, however this product remains effective on other less desirable grasses such as barley grass, enabling ryegrass to be kept in the system which is important for early feed.

Note – Make sure the paddock has had exposure to resistant ryegrass before using grass selectives or they will be really effective!

2) Crop Benefits

- Increased soil nitrogen in next crop phase which is less mobile than chemical fertiliser (doesn’t wash out of the soil as easily);
- Driving down crop weed seed bank;
- Decreasing crop disease carried by grasses during the pasture phase.

3) The Whole System

During our workshops several of the grower presenters and attendees com-

mented that the pasture phase was the linchpin that drove the whole system.

Some invested heavily in developing a quality high percentage legume phase though high levels of P and K and a disciplined manipulation program. Not only did this provide excellent spring and summer feed it also drove the fertility for their cropping program while managing the disease for a predominantly cereal focused rotation.

What's Available?

There are many chemicals available, however none are perfect. What we do know is that generally early action provides the best result.

Some high cost chemicals such as Raptor, Propyzamide and Spinnaker are coming off patent which will lead to a price reduction.

Some options out there for sub clovers are:

- Targa/Verdict for grasses, early and late season - Targa is soft on ryegrass;
- Propyzamide works well early;
- Low rates of Gramoxone at 2-3 leaf stage;
- Amine/Ecopar/Diuron mixes for broadleaf and doublegees.

Another general comment was to avoid effective cropping chemicals in the pasture phase and thus to help defer the onset of resistance to these chemicals.

There are plenty of brews and rates out there, so contact your agronomist for further information.

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So, if it's that good why isn't everyone doing it?

- Early feed gap due to grasses being taken out of the system.

One of the main drivers of stocking potential is length of growing season. For most of you the end is set by the onset of summer or spray topping, however the speed and density at which pasture gets established following the break of the season is something that individual managers can have an impact on.

The issue is that the grass must grow faster than clover to get established to a point where sheep can maintain on it. Therefore with manipulation taking out grasses, the manipulation needs to happen in the year before pasture goes into crop or alternative early feed sources need to be established.



Those that have a longer pasture rotation and are manipulating early in the phase are filling this feed gap by getting early bulk through sowing cereals or canola into pasture or are grazing crops through to July while the legumes get established.

- Fear of the Unknown
- One of the key reasons for not spray topping is fear of running out of feed. A great way to get a feel of this is by doing some trial strips on your own farm early and late in the season and observing the compensatory growth of legumes that are

left behind after manipulation. This might evolve to half or a full paddock over time.

It's mostly at the end of a poor season where feed has been tight and fear of running out of pasture has resulted in the paddock being un-manipulated. "What was I thinking?" is generally the comment and it's entirely understandable if pastures are tight it is counter intuitive to spray out a third or half. However, it's not until later in the season when grass seeds, early spray topping, poorer stock performance and legume seed are encountered that the result of the lack of action is apparent.

The question is "how much extra feed was grown as a result of not manipulating?" What compensatory growth of the clover was not achieved?

Am I manipulating for the sake of it?

In agriculture it's easy to get drawn into doing something because it's 'the thing to do'. Scanning ewes is a great example. This is a great management tool, but it is just a tool. What you chose to do with the information is what will give the result. Likewise, what are you trying to achieve through pasture manipulation? You need to ask yourself 'what is the end game?' Once this is worked out, what you do and whether it's worthwhile will be fairly straight forward.

In Summary

When it comes to pasture advice, historically you might have heard statements like 'green is good' and 'density is king'. That is, it doesn't matter what's there as long as there is lots of it. The main concern being is the system set up to be stocked appropriately, to graze what was

there before, worrying about growing more pasture or pasture of a higher quality. This is because winter stocking rate is still the key driver of profit in the sheep system and many sheep enterprises aren't optimally stocked. In addition, most species are the same value early in the season.

If we can move on from this and assume that the stocking rate is set and there will be no more gains from increased stocking rate then we have to accept financial gains are a lot harder to make, they are coming from:

- Management: Less losses and improved management of whole reproductive process = more lambs per ewe hectare and more kilograms of wool per hectare;
- Genetics: ASBV'S allow you to seek out a greater genetic gain;
- Price: What control do you have over this? Dare I say for 99% it's little to none?
- Growing more wool and meat from higher quality pastures.

This, combined with all the benefits to the cropping side of the business, justifies the manipulation that's already occurring on some farms and suggests that most should be investigating it and trialing it, if only in their last year of the pasture phase.

So do some research, make some investment. You just might be surprised by what the right combination of chemical manipulation and grazing management can produce!

The Sheep's Back - Case Study

NEW to the *The Sheep's Back* quarterly newsletter will be the addition of a grower case study. These case studies will investigate grower's systems from around the State and look into what's working, what makes a difference to the business and where the challenges lie.

The great thing about case studies is that they give insight into what different producers are doing and will hopefully reinforce or challenge ideas and encourage producers to try a different approach in their own operations.

"The definition of stupidity is to repeat the same thing over and over while expecting a different result! So if you are not happy with your sheep system or the returns you are getting, try something different!"

Our first case study is on Andrew Crook who farms with his family in the Merredin district.

Andrew recently spoke on how he grows feed and manages his pastures in his operation at the autumn Sheep Optimiser workshop we ran in Merredin.

Operation Overview

- Andrew has several properties around Merredin.
- Operation size - 6000ha including lease country.
- 72-75 percent is cropped.
- He has 1600 breeding merino ewes, 400 of which are joined to Suffolk rams.
- July lambing- lambing has consistently improved to above 100% since changing from autumn lambing.
- Currently he doesn't pregnancy scan, however he has seen a big increase in twin bearing ewes and is wanting to manage

them better. Subsequently he is looking towards implementing pregnancy scanning in 2016.

- Stocking rate ranges from 3-4.5 DSE depending on the season.



How Does He...

1) Manage Stocking Rate for the Season?

- The Front Door - If we have an early break and pastures hang on, we will increase crop % and will purchase stock. Happy to purchase any class of stock that is good value and free of disease (lice etc).
- The Back Door - If there is a major false break or it hasn't rained until mid to late May we will pull our major exit strategy lever which is selling older ewes that are joined to Suffolks.

This has a major impact on stocking rate and we will also utilise saltbush areas as well if need be.

We also find it very important to make plans for poor seasons when not under pressure and we have a plan together long before the break of the season so the decisions are made with a "cool head".

If it's still dry in June-July, we will also wet and dry the ewes at lamb marking and all the dry ewes are sold.

2) Manage Sale Stock?

- Lambs are traditionally weaned just be-

fore harvest. However with harvest creeping forward in the last few years, weaning has been delayed until after harvest. Wether lambs, both cross bred and merino, then all go onto a feedlot and are finished to approximately 42kgs.

- Andrew has been contemplating going towards the convenience of pellets, however one of the reasons he runs sheep is because of their ability to utilise the by-products of his cropping enterprise, such as feed wheat.

- Ewe lambs are classed and sold in June as a finished product off saltbush, which is seen as a great resource to the enterprise.

3) Manage Pasture?

- Like most farms, there is a range of rotations between paddocks, with some being continually cropped and others in rotation.

- Andrew only has a few improved pasture paddocks that have good quality clovers, consisting of Santiago and Gnungarrin. These get manipulated in June-July with Targa to get rid of barley grass. This improves the seed set of clover reducing the weed seed bank and disease in the following crop.

- Depending on how these pastures are stocked, they might not require follow up spray topping at the end of the season. They are year in year out pastures.

What's been working well and what have been great investments for the sheep enterprise?

- Sowing cereals into pastures or fallow (what he does with his paddocks between cropping).

- Andrew has sown oats early and deep in the last two years which has enabled him to tap into sub soil moisture and grow feed in March where otherwise there would be dust.

- In 2015 he sowed 30kg of oats and 20kg of urea on the 20th of March. This is currently getting the sheep through a reasonably bad false break and insured the farm against a poor start.

The two photos below were taken on the 8th May 2015.



- Andrew spray tops the paddock in September in preparation for the following year's crop. He estimates the whole process, including seeding and spraying etc was approximately \$60/ha.

- Lick feeders have been great for stock

management from an energy delivery and a time perspective.

- The use of dicyclanil (eg Clik®) has also given Andrew more flexibility with managing different classes of stock. He also no longer shears prior to feedlot entry through fear of lambs getting fly struck as the active life of dicyclanil covers them through the process.
- Labour is shared around all members of the business. No one is dedicated to managing stock

The Challenge

The biggest challenge is still managing the balance between sheep and crop. The challenge of preparing pasture paddocks for the coming year's cropping and bal-

ancing sheep feed requirement through spring is very tough, however wheat is king and drives the business.

The photo below shows dry sown oats in 2012 - note the dry paddock in the far background.



PAP Member Profile

Brett Jones

Brett is the principal of the Ejanding Poll and Merino Studs situated in the Central Wheatbelt of WA. They currently mate approximately 3000 ewes to merinos and produce between 200 and 300 bales of wool annually. Ram sales vary from 300 to 350 depending on seasonal demand. Ejanding also crops between 3200 and 4000 hectare of cereal crops annually.

Brett was educated at Cunderdin Agriculture College, followed by a year jackerooing at North Ashrose in South Australia before returning to Ejanding.

Brett chaired the Badgingarra Sire Evaluation site from 2004 to 2009 as well as being active on the committee of the Stud Merino Breeders Association and a past President. He has served on the Merino Consultative Group and is an active member of Merino Select.

He chairs the Livestock Committee at the Dowerin GWN Field Days, organising one of the biggest merino displays in WA each year.



Photo Courtesy: Farm Weekly

Sheep Easy 2015

WA's Most Successful Annual Sheep Conference is Back!

- ★ This year we are combining with the Great Southern Sheep Expo in Katanning on Thursday 20th and Friday 21st August.
- ★ Key Note speakers on making management of livestock easier.
- ★ Grower presentations on how they do it on their farm.
- ★ Demonstrations and side shows. As with previous Sheep Easy days, we will have a range livestock handling equipment operating, with sheep, side by side, so you can make your own mind up what will work for you. Stay tuned for what's new in 2015.
- ★ Remote water monitoring of troughs, tanks and pumps.
- ★ Data consultants who can make your data management easier.
- ★ The App Centre - see what's out there that works for sheep.
- ★ Sheep Elevation Competition - what's the easiest way to get a sheep on the back of a ute? What's your invention? Great prize money!
- ★ And many more high & low tech tools to make sheep work & management easier.

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Please note: Mention of product names does not imply endorsement.