

Putting the tools into practice – Lamb

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“Hillside”, Illabo, NSW



“Hillside”, “Woodfield” and “Caithness” make up 2200ha, all located within a 12-kilometre radius of Junee. The average annual rainfall is approximately 515mm, of which 60% falls in the growing season, April to October. The geographic spread can be an advantage in capturing isolated falls of rain. The country is all arable, being predominantly red brown earths. All paddocks have been limed to pH_{Ca} 5.0 - 5.5, and are currently being limed for the second time to maintain this pH.

We run a mixed farming operation, with cropping making up 60% (predominantly wheat and canola). Two livestock enterprises make up the remaining 40%. The livestock enterprises include a self-replacing Merino flock of around 1500 ewes and a similar number of wethers.

The other enterprise involves supplying XB lambs on a weekly basis to restaurants in Sydney, which we have been doing for 11 years. Approximately 2300 ewes run in small groups for both joining and lambing on a three week system, supplying around 50 to 60 lambs a week. The lambs are sold un-marked at approximately 7 or 8 weeks of age, or at 10kg dressed weight. As they are not sold through a wholesaler, we are responsible for all aspects of the supply, including abattoir, freight, delivery and invoicing.

Feed base

Winter active lucerne and sub clover are the main pasture base, grown as a 3-4 year pasture phase at the end of each cropping rotation. Perennial grasses, including winter active phalaris and cocksfoot, are only grown on the lighter soils that require a longer pasture phase between cropping rotations. Phalaris is extremely competitive and can become dominant, particularly when there are no dry sheep.

Wethers are grazed on stubbles over summer, and are an important tool in keeping a weed free fallow. This also allows the lucerne to be saved for higher priority lambing ewes and weaners.

Feed gap

The main feed gap is in June and July. The combination of lucerne, perennial grasses, stubble and rotational grazing have helped alleviate the traditional autumn feed gap. Lucerne is de-stocked to allow flowering and set seed in summer, increasing carbohydrate reserves in the roots and enhancing recovery time to increase feed going into winter.

Supplements, such as lucerne hay and grain, have not been used for many years but are available if necessary in severe conditions. Winter cereal crops are sometimes sown early so they can be grazed lightly if conditions permit in June and July.

The removal of lambs from their mothers at 8 weeks of age also means the ewes can be dried off in preparation for rejoining, without the same feed requirements as in a traditional system.

We have also stopped supplying lambs for about 6 weeks in February, a combination of heat, lack of moisture, slow growth and poor joining in July/early August being the major reasons.

Merinos lamb in July. Although August would suit the feed requirements better, it is a compromise for weaning time and size. We do not have time to fuss with them over harvest, and lambing ewes (XBs) tend to get the best available feed at that time of year.

Inputs

Phosphorus (P) levels are approximately 40ppm (Colwell). Cropping paddocks receive approximately 25kg P/ha annually, and pasture paddocks approximately 12 kg P/ha annually, depending on the DSE rating. We try to work on a rule of thumb of 1kg P/DSE/year, but this may vary depending on soil test results and cash flow. Sulfur is added as gypsum, mainly for the canola, but it is also of benefit to the pastures.

Stocking rates average 12 DSE/ha in winter and approximately half that in summer due to stubbles. All ewes are rated at 1.75 DSE and dry sheep at 1.2 DSE. These are fairly conservative stocking rates as we are not fond of hand feeding, and don't like bare paddocks or skinny sheep!

Management system

We have 3 labour units including myself and two employees, one who works predominantly with the stock and the other with farming. To justify the employees we do all operations ourselves, including spraying, windrowing, harvesting, haymaking and fencing. An extensive laneway system has been set up to improve access and ease of management. We also have well designed, one-man yards.

Pastures are managed as a crop. They are manipulated, winter cleaned, etc. as part of the whole enterprise, but mainly for the benefit of cropping. Weed-free, vigorous pastures mean better crop yields.

Soil tests are taken regularly and treated accordingly. As mentioned, liming is carried out on all paddocks to maintain pH_{Ca} at 5-5.5.

Future Challenges

- Improved utilisation of labour resource – we could have a further 300ha of crop and 4000 DSE to effectively utilise current resources
- Increased production to cater for tighter margins
- Reduce variations in wool cut
- Predict likely weather outcomes to confidently carry more stock
- Have greater control of marketing, eg. value adding our grain produce through flour milling
- Herbicide resistance

To succeed in agriculture, people have to enjoy what they do. If they find it a chore they won't be successful. If I worried purely about production, I would be running fine wool wethers at 18 DSE/ha, they would always be 45kg and skinny, run in a big mob rotation and be managed with fewer staff. Whilst I see the economics of such a system, I prefer the challenge of marketing – and the extra income somewhat offsets the extra labour costs.

Calendar of operations - "Hillside", Illabo
 Feed Curve - lucerne/sub clover pasture (SW Slopes)

