



GRAZING MANAGEMENT OF PERENNIAL WEEDS - 'IF IT GROWS EAT IT'

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Out of the 1980/81 drought I realised that stock would eat everything that grew, hence the statement 'If it grows eat it'. I also realise that on our property stock normally were only eating about 30% of feed grown. The two measures to increase feed utilization, subdivision and rotating large mobs of stock, go hand in hand. I might mention that I think grass management is an art and I am a very amateur artist.

PROPERTY

The property is 1700ha on the Upper Shoalhaven river valley at a height of 600 metres above sea level. The rainfall averages 700mm in erratic falls at anytime of the year. The soil is granite with a pH in water varying from 5.0 to 5.5 and originally covered with Kangaroo grass carrying 2.5dse/ha. Supering and broadcasting sub clover seed has raised this to 10 dse/ha.

STOCK

I run a mix of approximately 50/50 merino sheep and Angus cattle. Both are self replacing herds producing wool, CFA sheep, first cross lambs and either weaner cattle or fat yearlings. Paddock size was about 100-150ha but this is being reduced to 20-30ha with pasture improvement. There is a balance of about 60% improved to 40% natural pastures on the property.

PADDOCKS

My observation over the years is that supering the larger improved paddocks lead to an increase of Poa tussock so that it became the dominant plant. This occurred in large paddocks even if they were cropped with oats and then sown to pasture. Eventually the Poa took over as the dominant species.

Poa tussock dominance is assisted by the cold moist climate on the eastern fall Southern Tablelands. Our stock suffer cold stress in winter when there is a feed shortage. It is hard to get the stock to eat all the rubbish each year in our wetter summers unlike the situation on the slopes and plains.

UNDERSTOCKED & OVERGRAZED

The comment was made to me that the property was understocked and overgrazed which seems a contradiction. However it is not, because the Poa is ungrazed and grows unchecked and between the tussocks the country is overgrazed.

GRAZING MANAGEMENT OF POA TUSSOCK

Dealing with this unpalatable grass problem entails some initial sacrifices. Run I am not in the position of having many fat stock or topping the market because I encourage my stock to eat all paddock feed sources. To run animals set stocked with the aim of fattening them leads to dominance of poor quality herbage species in the pasture.

OVERCOMING SELECTIVE GRAZING

To overcome this problem of selective grazing and an increase in the amount of low quality grass species I have subdivided, rotated large mobs of stock at times and

fed protected protein (linseed meal). Subdivision is, I feel, essential to grass management. As a result I have been able to use controlled grazing successfully - moving a mob of 5000 sheep on a daily or 2 day basis on areas between 7 to 15 ha.

The sheep suffered a decline in condition but the following spring the pastures were noticeably better. The Poa was reduced to an inverted cone shape with fresh growth. Vulpia was markedly contained and has not become so dense and thistles were reduced. Phalaris and clover became more abundant and ryegrass also showed up.

TIMING

Heavy rotational grazing at the appropriate time can reduce or eliminate Poa tussock, fog grass, thistle, Vulpia and Patersons Curse. The art is when to use the grazing management which is correct for the weed species, time of year and particular seasonal conditions.

As a guide mature Poa tussock is normally heavily grazed over winter with supplementary feed as a bribe. Annual species and fresh tussock growth is best controlled by heavy grazing in spring.

ESTABLISHING NEW PASTURE

When sowing down improved pastures a quick but heavy grazing early in the pastures life in spring removes young tussocks and enables the perennial grasses to assert themselves. It is critical to graze the tussocks while they are young because Poa tussock is much more difficult to control once it becomes an established tussock.

As the pasture matures so grazing management, fodder conservation and supplementary feeding are all colours to use for a successful picture to develop.

PROTECTED PROTEIN

The feeding of protected protein was suggested by Professor Ron Leng of the New England University. I first used this idea in the winter of 1987 adding linseed meal to silage for cows and sheep. I had not been happy with traditional supplementary feeding of stock as they developed a 'cave crowd' attitude, waiting at the gate for the next meal. Using protected protein supplements all stock, both sheep and cattle, grazed over the whole area and made substantial inroads into the Poa tussock.

Since then, I have fed pellets of linseed, sulphur and bentonite in the winters of 1988 and 1989. I have noticed the stock not only eat the rough feed when being fed the linseed, they also graze it when not being supplemented. I also feel more confident in running more stock as I know I have this large reserve of undergrazed feed.

ARRIVING AT TODAY'S OBJECTIVE

My objective continues to be to control the overgrazing of the better grasses and to increase the utilization of all feed grown; that is to reduce the understocking of the paddocks. Which leads to a final question:-

Is it good country which is subdivided into small paddocks or do small paddocks lead to good country?