THE VALUE OF INTENSIVE SPRING GRAZING IN A MEDITERRANEAN ENVIRONMENT

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Many wool producers in south western Australia adopt a set stocking strategy over the spring (September to November) period. In most years this is the period when pasture production reaches its peak. Trials by Hyder (1996) on 0.5 ha plots have demonstrated that grazing pasture to a target feed on offer (FOO) is a tactic which increases the utilisation of high quality green pasture and increases wool production (kg wool/ha). The aim of this paper is to present the results from an intensive spring grazing evaluation on a commercial property and provide some practical points to consider on the sustainability of this grazing management tactic.

The evaluation was carried out in 1995 on a wool producing property at Wickepin, WA in a 395 mm rainfall area. The evaluation compared grazing set stocked Merino wethers at 10 sheep/ha with grazing a paddock to a target FOO of 1400 kg DM/ha/FOO and pasture growth rate were monitored on a three weekly basis. The target FOO was achieved by varying the number of Merino wethers on the paddock according to the monitored results. A peak of 38 wethers/ha was reached in mid August, to maintain the pasture at 1400 kgDM/ha.

The tactic of intensive spring grazing resulted in a 20% increase in wool production/ha and a 30% increase in gross returns/ha. Wool cut per head and micron were lower on the FOO paddock (5.6 kg and 21.3m versus 6.6 kg and 22.9m) whilst wool cut per hectare was higher (78 kg/ha vs 65 kg/ha) on the FOO paddock. The wool was valued on current market indicators and the gross return calculated using the valuation figure and clean wool cut per hectare. Gross return from the control and FOO paddocks were $269 and $349/ha, respectively.

The trial was repeated in 1996 with similar results. In 1997 the wool grower evaluated intensive spring grazing with Merino ewes and lambs. The practical difficulties of moving ewes and lambs in or out of paddocks to maintain a target FOO level was overcome by the strategic use of electric fencing.

Whilst this evaluation supports the findings of Hyder (1996), there are a number of other practical considerations. Intensive spring grazing releases the grazing pressure on other paddocks which then tend to produce a large quantity of excess feed. There are several alternative methods available for handling this feed. They include fodder conservation (hay and/or silage), hay freezing, mechanical topping (windrow and leave in paddock) or standing feed. Whilst the standing feed option would allow some of the less desirable pasture grass species to set seed, it does provides a paddock which would tend to be grass dominant and provide good early feed next season.

Intensive spring grazing also provides other management benefits including: control of red legged earth mite (Grimm et al. 1994), establishment of clover dominant paddocks ready for cropping in future years, or reduced grazing pressure on paddocks sown to aerial seeding clover pastures (eg Balansa clover).

Intensive spring grazing is an effective tactic which should be used within the context of a whole farming system.