



Information Exchange

The newsletter of the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network

No. 43 – April 2008

Critical level the key to fertiliser

HIGH FERTILISER prices have made it more important than ever to have a good understanding of soil fertility and likely pasture responses.

Mackinnon Project consultant Lisa Warn urged farmers listening to a recent BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB phone conference to take a logical approach to fertilising this season.

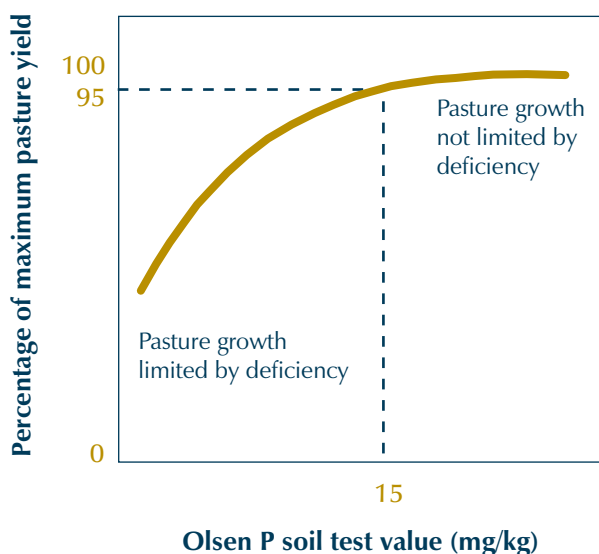
“A lot of people are asking what will happen if they don’t put out fertiliser this year,” she said.

“The first step is to look at recent soil tests and then calculate what you need to do to maintain levels based on the stocking rates and production for your particular soil type.

“A lot of people are running stocking rates 30% lower than usual due to the drought, so their need for maintenance fertiliser is lower and they will have less feed demand. In the short term, this takes the pressure off trying to get extra pasture growth.”

Lisa said a recent national project called ‘Better Fertiliser Decisions’ looked at the results of 250 pasture-based experiments conducted across Australia over the past 50 years.

It reviewed the critical levels



Research found little value in soil fertility exceeding critical values.

of phosphorous, potassium and sulphur needed to get up to 95% of the maximum pasture production.

Findings

The project found there was little value going over these critical values, which were generally around a phosphorous Olsen P level of 15, a sulphur CPC S level of 3 (or KCl-40 S of 8) and a potassium Colwell K of 130 for sandy soils through to 160 for clay loams.

“Once the Olsen P level gets

above 15, the extra pasture grown is minimal – a point of diminishing returns is reached,” Lisa said.

“It’s cheaper to maintain a soil phosphorous level at 15 than to try and keep phosphorus levels at 20. A higher portion of the phosphorus applied at Olsen P 20 is used to maintain the soil levels than for additional pasture growth.

“It’s not a simple case of more is better.

“If your phosphorus levels are Olsen P 20, you could skip fertiliser for a year and expect to

drop back two to three Olsen P units and maybe only sacrifice 3% of winter pasture growth.

“But if your soils are under Olsen P 15, it is still economic to apply superphosphate, even at \$400 a tonne, in terms of the expected response in increased pasture production, given a good pasture base and sound grazing practices.

“If you can’t afford to apply capital levels of fertiliser to improve fertility, then it is crucial to apply maintenance levels if the Olsen P is less than 15.”

Priority needed to be given to paddocks with low soil fertility but responsive pasture species, and any paddock likely to be cut for hay or silage this year.

“Don’t forget that grazing management can have a far greater impact on the productivity and persistence of perennial pastures species than fertiliser alone. It might be better to spend limited dollars on paddock subdivision this year,” Lisa said.

For a copy of the phone conference, phone (03) 5355 0531. For further information, phone Lisa Warn on (03) 9731 2375.

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Pasture cropping offers low-cost flexibility

MEMBERS OF the Black Sheep BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB group are considering pasture cropping to increase winter feed supply at a minimal cost.

While no one in the group has tried the technique, members are keen to 'give it a go' according to group co-ordinator Norm Tozer.

Norm said pasture cropping could give people flexibility with their enterprise mix and grazing management.

Pasture cropping is a zero tillage system whereby an annual crop is drilled into an existing perennial pasture without destroying the pasture. The crop is drilled into the pasture when pasture growth is low. Once that is harvested, the pasture is allowed to take over and provide feed during the summer. As a result, the paddock has 100% groundcover all year round.

Low cost

The only costs involved are spraying, sowing, fertiliser and harvesting. There are no cultivation costs.

"Colin Seis of Winona at Gulgong, NSW, has been a pioneer in pasture cropping over the past 15 years and spoke at a BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB forum a year ago," Norm said.

"His low-cost approach to sowing winter crops into perennial pastures to provide winter feed, as well as produce fodder or grain, caught people's attention and some of our group want to try the technique.

"It looks like the sort of approach people can use on their poorer perennial pastures after they have sprayed to control broadleaf weeds and annual grasses.

"After the last couple of drier years, people are looking for flexibility. We're normally in a 550-750mm rainfall area, but in recent years people have been getting 400-500mm and

FACTS OF THE MATTER

Pasture cropping involves drilling a crop into an existing perennial pasture base that is suppressed, but not killed.

There are no cultivation costs – only spraying, fertiliser and seed.

The technique was developed by Colin Seis of Gulgong, NSW, who grows winter active crops before sowing them into summer active pastures.

Pasture cropping has also been successful on native pastures and has resulted in thicker native pastures after the cropping phase.

Members of the Black Sheep BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB group are interested in trying the technique on native perennial pastures.

For more information, phone Norm Tozer on 5792 1139.

this has been the catalyst for people to change their approach.

"They can spray for weeds in autumn and then sit on the fence and watch the season progress before deciding to have a go at the last minute.

"There are challenges in using existing equipment, because you need wider drill spacings to accommodate the existing perennial pasture."

Speakers at the recent Black Sheep meeting included Cobram Department of Primary Industries agronomist Dale Grey and Andrew Russell from Baker Seed Co.

Dale Grey said there was a range of cereal varieties with maturity rates from very early to very late, with at least one month's difference between a very early and very late variety, depending on seasonal conditions.

Sow early

"The key to maximising grazing is to sow early and the variety is less important if the crop is only going to be grazed," Dale said.

"Winter habit varieties are useful because they have a long sowing window and, irrespective of sowing date, will not run to head unless they have experienced the shortest day of the year or a period of very cold weather.

"Winter habit varieties will usually reach the first node stage around August and that is a critical month for watching a grazing crop if you want to take it through to grain."

Rob Heal is a member of the Soil Health BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB group near Euroa and he tried pasture cropping in 2007.

"Some of our pastures were a bit ordinary after the ongoing dry and we're now changing our way of thinking to make more use of the native perennials that have survived by changing our management. We want to use cell grazing with some pasture cropping to help build a feed wedge going into winter," he said.

"Last year we tried a bit of pasture cropping, but it was a last-minute decision and then the spring failed. However, I was impressed with what was possible and excited about what we could achieve in a better season when there was an option to harvest grain."

Rob had a local contractor direct drill 100kg/ha of triticale into a native pasture in June after the paddock was sprayed with Glean and Diuron to control broadleaf weeds.

The plan was to drill the crop in with MAP, but it would not work in the machine being used, so 250kg/ha of single super was broadcast.

The late sowing meant Rob did not graze the growing crop, which then ran out of moisture and suffered from frost in September when the spring failed. The sheep were turned in after the crop went to head.

"We'll try it again this year, with the aim of sowing late April/early May, so that we have more feed earlier." ■

AT A GLANCE

Search for future rural leaders

BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB will sponsor two group members to attend the Marcus Oldham Rural Leadership Program at Marcus Oldham College in Geelong from June 22 to 27.

Candidates will be selected by a three-member panel from the Management Committee based on their potential to contribute as an industry leader and a demonstrated desire to improve their leadership skills and personal effectiveness.

The sponsorship covers accommodation, tuition, notes and meals.

More information on the course is available at www.marcusoldham.vic.edu.au.

Applications close on May 9. If you are interested or would like to nominate someone, phone Annette Taylor on (03) 5355 0531 or e-mail annette.taylor@dpi.vic.gov.au.

OJD changes

From March 31 buying and trading sheep while managing the risk of OJD became more closely related to regional risk.

Animal Health Australia has released information on the new Prevalence Areas and what these changes mean for producers and buyers.

Producers should check their location on the

relevant map to identify their new Prevalence Area and the appropriate ABC credit before completing a Sheep Health Statement. Trading credits for vaccinating and testing for OJD to the MAP Standard remain the same.

For more information, visit the Animal Health OJD website at www.ojd.com.au or contact your local DPI office.

Newsletter contributions

WE are keen to hear suggestions for this newsletter and are happy to take contributions.

Phone Jane Court on 5735 4351.

Grazing cereals eases the feed squeeze

WHAT STARTED as a Grain & Graze trial about grazing oats resulted in BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB Hesse group member Rod Batson also grazing wheat and barley crops that were then harvested for grain last year.

Rod's message is "ease the squeeze" and grow more winter feed by grazing cereals.

"Grazing cereals until growth stage 30 meant we could spell pasture paddocks over winter and better manage stock condition," he said.

Rod farms 800ha at Moriac; half the farm is used for cropping and half for pastures. The crops include oats, ryegrass for seed, barley, wheat and canola.

The property also runs 2000 Merino ewes, the majority of which are joined to Merinos to lamb in August, while a small portion are joined to terminal sires and lamb in winter.

Rod usually grazes his ryegrass crops and has "grazed oats forever", but in 2007 he grazed wheat and barley for the first time.

One of the big reasons for his interest in grazing cereals was the need to "ease the squeeze" on stock over winter when pasture availability was limited.

The trial

Last year Rod grazed a crop of Targa oats twice between May and August, then cut the crop for hay as part of a Grain & Graze trial into grazing cereals. The oat crop trial covered 2.5ha and was sown dry in mid-April at 100kg/ha with 100kg/ha MAP.

The oats were first grazed by pregnant Merino ewes in May, when the crop was knee height. The sheep stayed in the crop for 10 days until it was bare dirt and were then removed.

The paddock regrew and was grazed to the ground again by 200 aged Merino ewes with prime lambs at foot for a week in August.

After the final grazing in August the oats were given 80kg/ha of urea and left for hay and cut 115 round bales, the equivalent of 10t/ha.

Rod was so impressed with the way the oats responded after grazing that he took the advice of Grain & Graze researcher Simon Falkiner, who said he "could graze anything up until growth stage 30".

Rod then grazed a barley crop and a wheat crop, and another 40ha of oats, using the growth patterns of the different cereals, which gave him a staggered feed supply.



Rod Batson has embraced grazing cereals and then harvesting crops for grain or hay.

"We were desperate for feed and had carried all our sheep through the drought," Rod said.

"We had a bit less pasture and a bit more crop in, so when we got a late break we were under pressure."

The barley and wheat crops that were grazed were both harvested for grain and recorded as part of the Grain & Graze project.

Twenty hectares of Gairdner barley was grazed off by 1200 young sheep, then sprayed for broadleaf weeds. While the paddock was in a withholding period the sheep ran on an adjoining pasture paddock. They then went back into the crop and "chewed it into the ground" before they were removed and the paddock left for grain.

The sheep that came off the barley crop then went on to 32ha of Amarok red wheat that was managed in two adjoining paddocks for nine days at a stocking rate of 30DSE/ha in early September.

The Amarok wheat was sown in June and given 100kg/ha of urea after the last grazing. At harvest it produced 8.4t/ha of grain and 8.3t/ha of straw. A neighbouring ungrazed Amarok wheat crop produced 7.2t/ha of grain and 9.7t/ha of straw.

Information from the Grain & Graze project about grazing cereals will feature at the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB industry update in Bendigo on Friday, May 30 (see article on the right). ■

Fewture Farming Conference in Bendigo

A MAJOR sheep and wool conference organised by BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB on Friday, May 30, will give Victorian producers the opportunity to learn about the latest programs, techniques and developments shaping the future of farming.

This inaugural industry update will start with a dinner on Thursday, May 29, at the Quality Resort All Season's Bendigo where guest speaker Richard Gunner talking about life beyond the farmgate.

Richard Gunner's Fine Meats (RGFM) is one of the few companies in the Australian meat industry that is successfully operating a 'paddock-to-plate' production and marketing program.

The RGFM business encompasses a diverse range of operations all working together to add value to primary production and deliver exceptional products to wholesale and retail customers.

Beginning as a beef enterprise, the business now has an 1800-head cow herd, a 5000-head feedlot, a boning and distribution facility, retail butcher shops, a wholesale business supplying leading restaurants, and a number of respected meat brands, including Coorong Angus Beef and Pure Suffolk Lamb.

The update at the Bendigo Exhibition Centre on Friday, May 30, will include five presentations about:

- the future needs of customers;
- carbon trading/climate change;
- integrating grazing cereals into a sheep enterprise (see story on the left);
- sheep meat quality; and
- an interview by Raising the BAA judge Nigel McCukian with the competition's winner and BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB member Andrew Dufty.

The program will then feature 1½ hours of practical demonstrations that will involve participants in:

- paddock to plate;
- electronic identification systems;
- cereal grazing management;
- mulesing alternatives;
- sheep genetics; and
- GrassGro.

There will also be displays from Making More from Sheep, BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB, Meat & Livestock Australia, Australian Wool Innovation, Grain & Graze, Pastures from Space, GrassGro and Evergraze.

Registrations are essential and can be made by phoning (03) 5355 0531.

Quality lambs the secret to success

AUTUMN HAS arrived with great anticipation of a good break for what hopefully will be a great harvest this year.

The North East, or at least parts of it, received up to 50mm in the last week of March.

After 80 days without any rain, it lifted the spirits of those farmers who intend to plant crops and sheep and cattle producers looking for more winter feed reserves.

Lamb supply

I was talking to a large, privately owned agribusiness last week about setting up a lamb supply arrangement.

The business has done significant market research on the viability of supplying branded and unbranded lamb overseas and domestically.

In the medium term it sees grain prices falling and subsequently a huge opportunity for its business to integrate lamb feeding systems, so long as it has continuity of supply for performance-bred lambs.

These lambs will be Merino and crossbred and sourced from producers who are looking for long-term supply arrangements.

The message was clear – the company will need to know that the lambs going onto feed have the genetic capacity to grow, so it will want Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) for growth and carcase traits to ensure each lamb's capacity to grow and put on weight.

The other area of concern for specialist feeders is the availability of lambs to supply their markets and the cost of these lambs.



Jamie Ramage,
chairman,
**BESTWOOL/
BESTLAMB**

All the data and anecdotal evidence I have gathered, particularly over the past three years, tells me that the Australian sheep flock is continuing to shrink in numbers and at some stage this will have to affect supply and price.

In this scenario, the future looks pretty bright for those producers who are using good management systems, have control of their cost of production and are planning to run good numbers of sheep in the future.

Industry update

A date to set aside is May 30, when BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB will run an industry update for its members and sheep/wool producers across the state.

The event, at the Bendigo Exhibition Centre, and should be one of the 'must attends' of the year. Good-quality speakers, demonstrations and displays are the aim of the day.

A dinner before the event on May 29, featuring Richard Gunner of Richard Gunner's Fine Meats as the guest speaker and the supplier of the meal, should provide the basis for lively discussion on the evening and the next day.

I'll see you there. Come and say hello and tell me about your group. ■

Tales of two pets

Dog's diary

- 7am – Oh boy! A walk! My favorite!
- 8am – Oh boy! Dog food! My favorite!
- 9am – Oh boy! The kids! My favorite!
- Noon – Oh boy! The yard! My favorite!
- 2pm – Oh boy! A car ride! My favorite!
- 3pm – Oh boy! The kids! My favorite!
- 4pm – Oh boy! Playing with a ball! My favorite!
- 6pm – Oh boy! Welcome home Mum! My favorite!
- 7pm – Oh boy! Welcome home Dad! My favorite!
- 8pm – Oh boy! Dog food! My favorite!
- 9pm – Oh boy! Tummy rubs on the couch! My favorite!
- 11pm – Oh boy! Sleeping on my people's bed! My favorite!

Cat's diary

Day 483 of my captivity.

My captors continued to taunt me with bizarre little dangling objects. They dine lavishly on fresh meat, while I am forced to eat dry cereal.

The only thing that keeps me going is the hope of escape, and the mild satisfaction that I get from clawing their furniture. Tomorrow I will eat another houseplant.

Today my attempt to kill my captors by weaving around their feet while they were walking almost succeeded – must try this at the top of the stairs.

In an attempt to disgust and repulse these vile oppressors, I once again induced myself to vomit on their favorite chair. I must remember to try this on their bed.

Decapitated a mouse and brought them the headless body in an attempt to make them aware of what I am capable of, and to try to strike fear in their hearts. They only cooed and condescended about what a good little cat I was. Hmmm, that did not work according to plan.

There was some sort of gathering of their accomplices. I was placed in solitary throughout the event. However, I could hear the noise and smell the food. More importantly, I overheard that my confinement was due to my powers of inducing 'allergies'. I must learn what this is and how I may use it to my advantage.

I am convinced the other captives are flunkies and maybe snitches.

The dog is routinely released and seems more than happy to return. He is obviously a half-wit.

The bird, on the other hand, has got to be an informant and speaks with them regularly. I am certain he reports my every move. Due to his current placement in the metal room, his safety is assured. But I have patience, I can wait, it is only a matter of time.



BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB is a co-operative program for wool and lamb producers seeking to boost their farm profit and productivity.

For information about the BESTWOOL / BESTLAMB network, phone (03) 5355 0531, e-mail bestwool@vff.org.au or visit www.bestwool.com