



For many of you balancing your stocks nutritional requirements with crop production is a constant challenge, with many relying on grazing crop stubbles to carry stock through the autumn feed gap. There is a need to maintain the health of cropping paddocks while allowing the use of stubbles as stock feed; relying on stubbles alone is not the answer.

Don't rely on stubbles alone

Stubbles are a valuable feed source for livestock, however there are several limitations to stubbles as a feed source:

- Machinery leaves little grain behind
- Only a small proportion is highly digestible (25% of dry matter)
- Young sheep only maintain live weight when spilt grain and green leaf material are available
- The quality of the dry matter continually declines over time, with breakdown increasing after summer rainfall
- Supplementing sheep with grain will be necessary to maintain live weight after stubble quality declines

The feed value of stubbles varies greatly between crop species, with the most valuable being legume stubbles, followed by cereals and then canola. To ensure stock are not losing weight on stubbles, they should be removed when the grain content falls below 100kg/ha. As a rough guide, in a 0.1m² quadrant this threshold is equivalent to an average of 28 grains of wheat or oats, 25 grains of barley, 8 lupins or 5 field peas.

It is also important to note that:

- Paddocks should not be grazed when ground cover is 50%* or below
- Excessive grazing damages soil structure, reduces soil fertility and results in poor crop root growth
- With low feed availability, sheep will begin to deplete pasture seed banks, reducing biomass of subsequent pasture phases

*50% ground cover is estimated to be 1000kg/ha for cereal stubbles and 750kg/ha for dry pastures.

Alternative summer grazing options

The key to the profitable and sustainable integration of livestock with cropping is to use a range of alternative feeding strategies. Aside from hand feeding grain, alternative summer grazing options available are:

Standing Crops

- Sown in early autumn in small paddocks, they can provide high protein feed for early grazing at the break-of-season eg. Oats and tetraploid ryegrass

Forage shrubs – such as saltbush and tagasaste

- Are drought tolerant and can be rotationally stocked for short time periods

Perennial pastures – such as Rhodes grass or lucerne

- Used to provide out-of-season green fodder as well as maintaining ground cover in lighter country

Confinement areas

- Small paddocks with adequate shade, feed and water to minimise energy expenditure and defer grazing of pastures

Feedlots

- Used for deferring grazing of pastures or maintaining stock during late breaks, particularly pregnant ewes

Summer fodder crops – such as maize or forage sorghum

- Planted opportunistically in spring and wiped out with a herbicide before seeding the following year

The suitability of each option for your system will depend on climatic conditions, and as the aim is to maintain adequate year-round ground cover several options can be utilised to allow livestock to rotate between systems.

For more information visit

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