

Grazing Winter Cereals – Beware of Pitfalls

Grazing cereal crops during late autumn/early winter frequently assists producers to meet livestock feed needs during winter, allows pastures ‘recovery’ time, provides highly nutritious palatable feed without significantly impacting on subsequent crop grain yields. Well established cereal pastures can handle stocking rates of 20-30 DSE and may provide lamb growth rates in excess of 250g/h/d.

Depending on the variety and growing conditions most cereal pastures can be grazed anywhere from late emergence to when the first node is detectable on the main stem without causing significant losses in future grain yields. Under most conditions this should occur 6 to 8 weeks after emergence. If stock eat tillers containing a developing head (node) tillers will die and potential grain yields decline.

Winter cereals are generally high in protein (16-20%), energy (10-12 MJ/kg DM) and are highly digestible during early vegetative (growth) stages. Low fibre contents and possible mineral deficiencies however may impact on production. Health issues when grazing cereals may include scouring, enterotoxaemia (pulpy kidney), nitrate/nitrite poisoning (common in stressed crops), hypocalcaemia (calcium deficiency) and hypomagnesaemia (magnesium deficiency).

Scouring may be prevented through providing additional roughage to increase dry matter intake and slow gut flow. Doing so increases vitamin B12 absorption (needed for energy production within the ruminant), improves the availability and absorption of magnesium and provides additional Vitamin D which has a specific role in modifying the ruminant’s calcium to phosphorus balance.

Vaccinate (5 or 6 in 1) stock prior to grazing cereals to minimise pulpy kidney risk. Don’t allow hungry stock full access to cereal pastures due to nitrate/nitrite poisoning risks. Have stock ‘full’ or accustom them to the new feed by periodically grazing for 1-2 hours a day prior to set stocking or rotationally grazing the crop.

Trial work nationally has shown improvements in growth rates when mineral supplements such as sodium, calcium and magnesium are provided ad lib. Unfortunately there are wide ranging views on the percentages of additives to be provided within a supplement mix. Free access to ‘dry’ licks consisting of a 50:30:20 salt, lime and Causmag mix should meet

sodium, calcium and magnesium requirements. Dolomite and Epson salts may also be used as a magnesium source if Causmag is unavailable.

Creep gate feeding systems that prevent the ewe access to, but allow lambs entry, to cereal pastures can be used if pasture bulk is poor. By providing the lamb with additional feed a ewe's overall feed requirements are reduced, through lowering the physiological need for milk production. Grain supplementation rates may also be reduced during this period, decreasing overall feed costs and needs.