

Livestock - Farming Systems site

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Summary

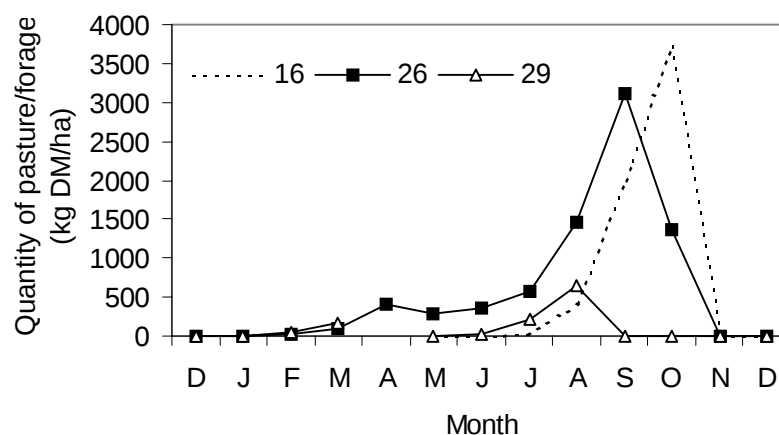
The drought of 2002 continued to impact on sheep production in early 2003 through a lack of bulk in crop stubbles and a high erosion risk if these stubbles were grazed. Breeding ewes were retained in the Hungry Sheep system using containment areas to avoid erosion problems and to maintain ewes. No other system contained significant sheep numbers during 2003. July-dropped crossbred lambs grazed on medic pasture and reached a weight of 45kg in mid-December. The ewes received no supplementary feeding from July, at a stocking rate of 3.7 ewes/ha. This was largely due to early germination of medic pasture in February, and sufficient follow-up rain to keep some plants alive, producing adequate pasture in late autumn/winter. Regenerating pastures were more productive than pastures sown at the autumn break.

Pasture Production

There was little difference in the density of pasture plants in different paddocks after four years of the trial, as all medic pasture or fallow paddocks had between 139 and 196 medic plants/m² in June 2003. Paddock 29 (Fuel Burners) was sown to medic, however, this sowing killed medic which germinated with the February rains. The similar densities of the Hungry Sheep paddock (26) and paddock 29 do not reflect the much larger plant size and therefore quantity of pasture in paddock 26. The vetch paddock (16 - Zero Till) was resown in June and also failed to achieve the early production of paddock 26. The quantity of pasture in different paddocks is shown in Figure 1. Paddock 29 was fallowed after August. Clearly, in this year it was better to allow pastures to regenerate from an adequate seed bank than to sow pastures.

The pasture in paddock 26 was over 90% medic. Grazing by sheep helped to control brassica weeds and reduce seed-set. When the sheep were removed from paddock 26 in December, 900 kg/ha of medic pods remained. This is valuable either for later grazing by sheep, or to renew seed reserves for future pastures.

Figure 1. The quantity of live pasture/forage in paddocks 16 (vetch, Zero Till), 26 (medic,



Hungry Sheep) and 29 (sown medic, Fuel Burners) throughout 2003.

Sheep Production

In previous years ewes have not required feeding over summer/autumn. Although crop stubbles were grazed by ewes in the Hungry Sheep system in late January and through February, the low quantity of

stubbles as a result of the 2002 drought required ewes to be returned to and fed in a containment area until late June.

The ewes grazed pasture in paddock 26 from late June to mid December, without any supplementary feeding. Liveweights of ewes throughout the year are not available. First-cross lambs grew at over 400g/day in October, and from a July lambing reached 45kg by mid December.

The stocking rate throughout the year is shown in Figure 2 and averaged 4.8 DSE/effective grazing ha. This was slightly less than that used in 2002 and only half that carried in 2000 and 2001. However, heavy supplementary feeding was required in 2001 to support the higher stocking rate.

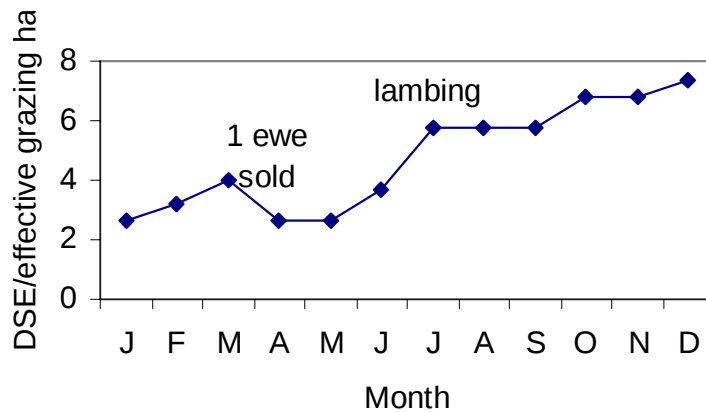


Figure 2. Stocking rate (dry sheep equivalents/effective grazing ha) for the Hungry Sheep system throughout 2003. (Effective grazing ha includes uncropped area and an allowance for grazing crop stubbles).

Comments

The impact of regeneration/early sowing coupled with the early rain was a feature of the differing performance of the pasture/forage paddocks in 2003. Increasing autumn/winter pasture production is more important for increasing stock carrying capacity than spring production, of which there is usually excess. However, early or dry sowing also increases the risk of loss of seedlings with a false break and