Converting to TechnoGraze

Martin Oppenheimer was tired of renovating his sown pastures every 10-15 years. Add to this a desire for better pasture utilisation, and the need to run ewes in small mob sizes for single-sire matings, and he began looking at how to handle things differently.

TechnoGraze, the intensive rotational grazing (IRG) system originally developed for fattening dairy bull beef in New Zealand, appears to have provided the solution.

After doing a course with TechnoGraze inventor Harry Weir in New Zealand, three years ago Martin divided 200 hectares of 'Petali', his Merino stud and commercial operation near Walcha, into five TechnoGraze laneways that allow for subdivisions into 1.25 or 2.5 hectare paddocks.

Ewes have been grazed in the system at up to 18 ewes per hectare, but for the past year have been stocked at 15 ewes per hectare, the equivalent of 21-22 Dry Sheep Equivalents (DSE). The rotational grazing system Martin had previously worked with allowed stocking rates of 15-16 DSE/ha.

Along with increasing his productivity, the system has resolved several of Martin's management challenges.

"Before setting up this system, I was looking at renovating pastures we'd sown in the 1990s," he says. "From what I've been seeing over the past couple of years, except for a couple of areas, we may not need to renovate at all."

Deep-rooted palatable grasses like cocksfoot and phalaris, which tend to get over-grazed under conventional grazing management, are making a resurgence. "We gave up sowing phalaris, because even though it would be part of the pasture mix, it would just disappear. Now we're seeing it come back from nowhere."

Intestinal worm counts are extremely low, despite a wet season. The last faecal worm egg counts on sheep under IRG were between 100-300 eggs per gram.

"The counts were so low, it crossed my mind that if we didn't have adequate clean country elsewhere, we would leave the lambs in the Techno system and take the ewes elsewhere."

The ease of managing small mobs in the TechnoGraze system, and the ability to accurately budget feed, is also influencing weaning patterns.

"Normally we wean lambs at 20-25 kilograms, because we've found that if we wean them under 20kg their survival rate drops dramatically," Martin said. "The heavier we wean, the fewer losses we have over winter."

"With the feed we're carrying in the Techno system this year, we don't have the need to wean early. We might wean at 28-30kg, which means the lambs will sail through their first winter."

The degree of management flexibility he's discovering under TechnoGraze is greater than conventional grazing management.

"The TechnoGraze setup itself is just a tool; within that, you can adjust your management any way you like to suit your own circumstances," Martin said.

TechnoGraze™ – what is it?

Most rotational systems employ big mobs in small paddocks to provide a quick, hard graze followed by a long rest. TechnoGraze differs in employing smaller mobs tightly packed on tiny paddocks – about 110-200 ewes on 0.6ha at 'Mt William' – within a system set up for maximum management efficiency. On standard rotational grazing systems, one mob tends to move around asymmetrical paddocks. TechnoGraze uses a system of similar-sized lanes that are progressively taped off to provide the same effect for up to six small mobs. This means that each small paddock gets about 3-4 days of blanket grazing followed by a 45-90 day rest. It also means that six small mobs can be managed individually side-by-side to allow management strategies like single-sire mating or different supplementation.

Producer information

Producer: Martin Oppenheimer

Location: Walcha, NSW

Property area: 1,500ha

Enterprise:
Stud and commercial Merinos, traded cattle, prime lambs

Goals:
To sustainably produce more volume with more value

Livestock:
12,000 sheep, 500-1,000 trading cattle

Pastures:
Fescue-dominated deep-rooted perennials with legumes and herbs

Soil types:
Grey loams, some basalt and granite

Annual rainfall: 800mm

More information

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