

INTEGRATION OF SHEEP ON A DAIRY FARM

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BACKGROUND

My wife and I have been actively farming in the Menzies Ferry District for 12 years. The property is 211 ha in total, with the dairy unit comprising 85 ha. A married couple are also employed on the farm. My property backs on to the Maitara River. Ninety-nine percent of the property floods in a 100-year flood — there have been three such floods in the last 10 years.

When I started out, farm development was top priority, subdivision, water and grass species all being important. During farm development feed available for stock was limited, but with better subdivision and grazing management, stocking rate and total production have increased.

Stock wintered this year will be:

200 Cows and in-calf heifers	@ 8 su = 1600 su
55 Rising yearlings	@ 6 su = 330 su
23 Two-year-old steers	@ 6 su = 138 su
64 Steer calves	@ 4 su = 256 su
1150 Romney x ewes	@ 1 su = 1150 su
250 Hoggets	@ 0.7 su = 175 su
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	3649 su
	(17.3 su/ha)

Dairy: Average production on the dairy farm over the last three years has been 388 kg/ha milkfat. Best production to date is 400 kg/ha.

Ewes: Lambing % (ewes to ram) 145%.

Wool production: 33 bales main shear ewes 3.2 kg/head

All supplements are made on the farm. Grazing was required this year because of the March 1987 flood.

Four years ago I decided to run my hoggets behind the cows for weed control and maintain grass quality instead of spraying for ragwort. This policy has been refined to today's standard and now is an important part in my farm management.

Advantages in integrating sheep with cows are:

1. Weed control

No cost in sprays or time involved in spraying for weeds like ragwort and docks.

2. Grass control

Ability to alter stocking rate at various times of the year; grass quality is kept higher.

3. Less topping

Cost saving in fuel and time.

4. Extra money

Wool and lambs; sheep are in effect eating rubbish that would be left to rot after mechanical topping.

Four years ago I made a management change, following my 170 milking cows with 200 hoggets. Initially I break-fenced a paddock into two or three sections

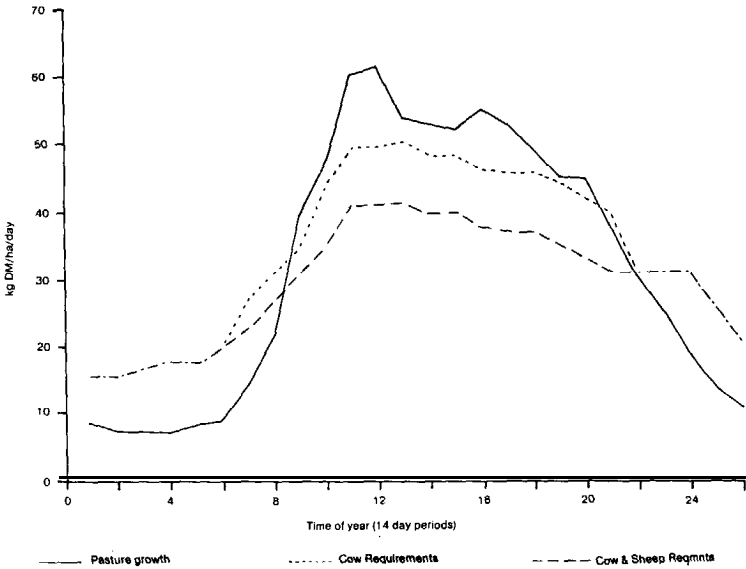


Figure 1: Pasture growth and stock demands over the season.

depending on pasture amount. There was a problem in that the sheep were too far behind the cows, which created grass quality problems. Ragwort went from a grazable vegetative plant to a woody reproductive plant.

After a number of seasons, through trial and error, I arrived at my current management system which is outlined below. Since then I have been through three different springs, dry, wet and a slow growing one.

I operate a night and day 1 2-hour grazing system because of farm layout.

At calving I have 4-5 paddocks of late-autumn-saved pasture on the night block. Cows start calving on 25 August and graze saved pasture. Mid point of calving is about 8 September, 1 O-1 2 days after the start of calving. Once the cows finish the first paddock of early-winter-saved feed, hoggets automatically follow the cows. Weed control starts now. With hoggets following behind the cows it is similar to break feeding hoggets in the spring. Assessment is made of residual cow feed and steers may be brought into the rotation to help control quality, along with the hoggets. Similarly, old ewes may be used.

Once the cows finish these saved paddocks, I go back on to my day and night system — normally around 8 September.

The hoggets, and steers if necessary, do one round on the night block-rotation length approximately 35 days night, day rotation 30 days. After the first round hoggets go to the block and again stocking rate is manipulated with yearlings entering the system when feed allows it, and these follow the cows. 150 ewes and lambs are brought into the night block and with steers follow the cows here.

Growth starts early (mid October) and rotation is sped up to 24 days. Silage may be shut up now if a surplus is apparent. With silage shut up the rotation length can get down to 16 days. Silage crops are very even and ragwort free.

Ewes and lambs are taken out of the night block at weaning (7 December), they are shorn and the thin ewes are brought back through on to the night block. Hoggets remain one day behind the milking cows on the day rotation. Silage is made in early December.

At the end of December the hoggets and thin ewes are combined and go round the night block for one rotation, then round the day block for one rotation. The rotation is lengthened in March to approximately 35 days and nights and sheep stop following the cows to build up an autumn feed bank Rams go out on 1 April. Winter rotation is 60 days on grass without supplement and 30 days (wet days) on a pad (gravel beach). Hoggets graze the wettest paddocks on the dairy unit in early winter (about the end of May).

Cow requirements show cow demands over the season. Bringing in sheep lifts stock demand per ha from the cow line to the new line. This increased pressure increases pasture utilisation and allows supplements to be made. We require about 35 bale equivalents per cow wintered. The sheep act as toppers, cleaning up excess grass and most importantly ragwort and other weeds.

Disadvantages of integrating sheep are:

1. Shifting several mobs of stock every day.
2. Extra wire for fences and gateways.

POSSIBILITIES

There are, I believe, two quite feasible options for existing dairy farmers who don't have the advantage I have on my place, namely, a bank of sheep to call on at any time to help control pasture. These are:

1. Graze shorn sheep and hoggets from early September through to the end of February.
2. Buy in shorn hoggets so no dagging is required, drench them as they come off the truck (i.e. no yard handling) and sell them at two-tooth fairs.

CONCLUSION

Sheep can be integrated on a dairy farm with a minimum of fuss and the stock performance of both types of animals need not be impaired. There is no reason why other dairy farmers in the Otago and Southland area could not integrate sheep with cows and gain in the long term.

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