

# Sheep for Profit® Newsletter

July 2008



**Unlocking the potential for you  
to make it happen**

## CONTENTS

- **The short term challenge of getting through this year continues. But there are some very exciting longer term opportunities & challenges**
- **Employment on sheep & beef farms continues to be an issue – both getting good people and keeping them!**
- **Gavin Milne, Agricom gives us an overview of how we can get a balance between a good summer Brassica crop and the risk of nitrate toxicity.**

## Light at the end of the tunnel

### The short tunnel

No-one needs reminding how difficult the last couple of years have been for most sheep and beef farmers but it does seem there may be some light appearing at the end of the long tunnel.

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For most the rain has come, but the drought is not really over yet. We suggest the pressure will continue at least until weaning.

Number one goal is to make sure next year's income is as high as possible. That means making sure whatever breeding stock are on board are looked after for optimal per head performance – better to get 100% from 80% than 60% from 100%!

Winter covers are low, nitrogen is expensive and supplement is impossible so the best option is to continue to carefully monitor the ewes/cows and get rid of any that will not wean a good lamb/calf.

Stock values are generally still low but better to take the cash now and use the feed to improve cash later. Try not to hang onto hoggets unnecessarily, they should be worth quite a bit now and if numbers need to be lifted next year worry about that then. Got to get through the next few months.

### The longer tunnel

For those of us who are still very passionate about the future of sheep & beef farming isn't it exciting to continually read and hear the strong message that the global food demand will be increasing dramatically?

On the other hand the ever increasing messages that we need to take more care with the way we produce that food (meat) can be a turn-off for many. For years we have been procrastinating and making lots of excuses. The current government doesn't help much with some extremely ill-founded knee jerk decisions that are more based around political gain than around increasing the wealth of our country.

Despite all that the message is now very, very clear. It's no more a question of "if" or "when" it is NOW!! Whether we like it or not the people with the money to pay for high quality food are demanding the meat they purchase and consume has some key qualities - Food safety, Welfare, Environmental care physical & social.

The current emission tax proposals are so ludicrous (how do we recover \$20 tax from every 15.5kg lamb sold?) that surely logic will sort that out much the same as the fart tax was sorted out. That's politics.

At the farm business level we must stay focussed on what we can achieve. That means accepting the need

for dramatic changes and getting stuck in to get ready to ride the wave, not be left behind paddling futilely trying to catch up later on.

We have always believed that the Sheep for Profit concept has the potential to develop into something that enables powerful branding related to welfare, food safety and environmental care.

We know most Sheep for Profit farmers already have a lead of several years by being able to demonstrate animal welfare and we have enough data to set standards that demonstrate “best practice” for animal welfare.

We have made a commitment to change the perception from “profit” to “welfare” and are working on creating systems related to food safety and environmental care.

Fiona is building a new web site that will be aimed at a market much wider than NZ sheep and beef farmers.

We have been investigating specialist, niche lamb marketing opportunities.

So hang in there, things can improve. The future presents huge opportunities and threats. It just depends on whether your glass is half full or half empty!

### **“This is the job, take it or leave it”**

Not anymore! The recent series of TV advertisements showing new entrants into the dairy sector highlights what people are looking for. Can you match the time with the family, kids on flash bikes, BBQ lunches, fishing in the river, no cow shit...?

It seems employment issues have become a bit more common over the last few years. Common problems have been unsatisfactory work ethics and head-hunting.

It’s probably linked to national unemployment being at record low levels and the growing attraction of the dairy sector. At the moment this is unlikely to change much so somehow employers need to think about making their employment opportunities more attractive.

The continual need to lift productivity can easily lead to longer hours, something the generation X or Y don’t really aspire to any more. They are looking for the “well-being” factor as a critical part of their life.

Employment has been and will always be first about getting the right people. But we need to provide a better working environment to get more out of the people without asking them to work longer hours.

To compete in a tight labour market, employers will need to make a significant investment in technology and infrastructure to improve time efficiencies. They will need to develop more formalised training programmes and retraining programmes. They will need to become better leaders and managers and position their people to take ownership of what they do, become accountable for what they do – i.e. learn how to delegate more.

The good people are always the ones who want to move up the ladder. If they don’t get new challenges they will go somewhere else. A good leader always strives to make his/her position redundant.

## **Recruitment rules**

### **The decision has down-stream effects**

- Always consider the impact of a new person on the current team members. Consider inviting key team members to be involved in the process.
- A person with ambition will want responsibility – are you prepared to give up some of the things you do?
- An school leaver will not know much – are you prepared to put the time and effort in for training and mentoring?

### **Don’t over-promise**

It’s easy to make the job appear attractive to get the “right” person, but that person will leave if promises are not delivered. That means going through the whole process again.

### **Training & mentoring should be a prerequisite**

More and more people entering the farm employment sector have not been brought up on farms. Training should involve both on- and off-farm activities.

### **Treat all potential employees with respect**

They have a very powerful grapevine and bad news travels fast and far.

- Try to make the final selection decision quickly – the good people don’t have time to muck around waiting
- Respond to every application received

- If starting date is well after final selection, keep in touch to show your commitment and test theirs.

### Do the home work

Make sure you know what you want. Best to write up a concise job description and stick to it. Taking on that “really good” person who doesn’t match your job description will end in disaster.

- C-V’s and written references often don’t mean much so always ask for several referees and make sure you talk with them.

## Nitrogen use on summer Brassica crops



When looking at all the parameters around nitrogen (N) use on summer brassica it is good to start simple, like “how do the different summer brassicas grow and what is the N make-up of the plant that is being used?”. Brassica crops vary in their make-up (Fig 1) in their proportions of leaf, stem and bulb.

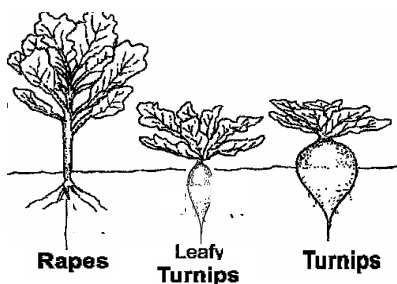


Figure 1. Summer Brassica types

Leaf is typically high in N and therefore crude protein while stem/bulb is typically low in N. For example, typical N contents in leaf are between 2.5-3.5% vs. around 1.5-2% in stem.

The implications of this is that the leafier the crop grown, the more N is required to drive the crop.



The leaf turnips (e.g. Hunter) are basically a leaf crop, and most of the yield is leaf.



Rapes (e.g. Winfred) are a combination of leaf and stem with the exact ratio influenced by cultivar.



Summer bulb turnips (e.g. Rival) are a combination of bulb and leaf with exact ratio being influenced by such things as cultivar and plant density (sowing rate). Some of the higher-yielding summer turnip crops are actually largely leaf crops with moderate bulb production.

The other implication for nitrogen with the different brassica types can be seen in Figure 1,

with both leaf and bulb turnips having very limited lateral root development, while the rape has particularly strong tap root and lateral root development.

These different root structures indicate that rapes are more effective at utilising broadcast fertiliser, while turnips, with narrower root structure, are more responsive to banded fertiliser at establishment, or will need higher broadcast rates of fertiliser than the rapes as they don't have the same potential to scavenge.

### **Practical guidelines for nitrogen use in summer crops**

For winter brassica, and other crops that are in the ground for long periods of time, a soil test for N is vital to calculate crop the best fertiliser programme for each paddock. Paddocks going from grass to brassica will have a large amount of mineralised N becoming available through late-summer and autumn. These paddocks may start at a very low fertility status, as it is often the most run out of pastures that are going through a brassica before regrassing, so soil tests are an important place to start.

With summer turnips (Rival) and leaf turnips (Hunter) that are first grazed between 45 and 80 days after sowing, mineralised N, although very important, cannot provide a fast enough release of N to have an impact on the first harvest of these short-term crops.

Turnips in general, as described earlier, have very limited ability to scavenge laterally and have a high N requirement for leaf production. At drilling it is most effective to place both phosphate (P) and N in the row at sowing. An ideal starter that is hard to beat is 100 kg/ha of DAP, topped up with a broadcast application of fertiliser consisting of 30 units P and 35 units N.

For summer turnips (Rivals), one follow-up application of 46 kg/ha of N at canopy closure is often enough to obtain a good crop.

For leaf turnips (Hunter) it is desirable to apply 35 kg/ha of N after each grazing period. Allow 21 days after N application before grazing to minimise nitrate poisoning.

For rape (Winfred), placing both phosphate (P) and nitrogen in the row at sowing (100 kg/ha DAP) is still the most effective establishment option, topped up with another 30 kg/ha of P and 35 kg/ha N during the establishment phase.

Rapes are often exposed to particularly dry environments, where nitrogen use during the regrowth cycles must be carefully considered. In low-rainfall climates there is very little N leaching through summer, and often low growth potential, which often means there is quite a large amount of N available on the autumn break. This is the greatest period of risk from nitrate poisoning, as the rape starts actively regrowing from these prolonged dry phases and there is a high amount of N available in the soil.

It is most important not to put hungry animals on to autumn-saved rape, and to monitor the animals closely over the first week, as simple things such as changes in weather (overcast conditions) can elevate nitrates dramatically. Crops growing in good soil moisture during warm and sunny conditions are much less likely to cause nitrate toxicity. Herbage samples can be taken to veterinarians and tested for nitrate levels although these can vary widely and change in a matter of days.

Nitrate toxicity can still be a risk if N fertiliser is not used, because soils may have enough N to raise levels in herbage in particular climatic conditions. Also, taking N fertiliser out of the programme may reduce crop yield.