

Managing pastures in a challenging season

Michele Ryan, Dairy Extension Officer, South West DPI Dairy Team, Warrnambool

The keys to managing pastures in a challenging season are to maintain a 5 cm residual, and graze at 3 leaf; or if using nitrogen fertiliser to boost grass available, aim for 2.5 leaf.

It is critical to get the rotation length out sooner rather than later in Autumn/Winter, because once it is too fast it is very difficult to slow it back down. The means to keeping our rotations on track is to take notice of the leaf appearance rate of the dominant species in the pasture, which in the south west is generally perennial ryegrass. During the middle of winter it is important to remember that it can take anywhere from 20 to 35 days for a ryegrass leaf to appear, and the ideal time to graze perennial ryegrass is at 3 leaf stage.

So you might be thinking that if the leaf appearance rate is 30 days per leaf, you would need to have a rotation of 90 days to get the ideal grazing point of 3 leaves. Before you pronounce that it can't be done, it is important to keep in mind that 3 leaves rarely need more than 45 to 50 days to regrow because only one of them requires 30 days while growing in the depth of winter, and the other two will appear quicker, growing either before or after the very coldest period.

There are two ways to lengthen a grazing rotation; the first is to simply suffer the lower total feed intake of the cow and reduced milk production for the longer term benefit of the better pasture growth, once the longer rotation is established. The second and preferred option is to maintain the cow's total feed intake by supplying more supplements while lengthening the rotation. Although using supplementary feed initially increases costs, milk production will be maintained at a higher level both during lengthening the rotation and when the longer rotation is established. It also ensures that the pasture is not grazed below 5 cm, thus maintaining pasture production and persistence.

Even with supplementary feed prices being slightly more expensive than usual it is still important to make sure that you are maintaining the correct pasture residuals, as this is where the dollars can be made. Remember by overgrazing our pastures we are limiting the potential pasture grown and an extra tonne of pasture consumed per hectare is conservatively worth \$30,000 to most dairy businesses.

If you suffer from water logging on your farm it is very important to remove cows from these paddocks after four hours of grazing and move them to a stand off area. About 80 percent of the feed in the paddock will be eaten, the rotation length will be maintained, and the longer grass will help reduce the amount of pugging damage. Trying to avoid pugging damage by allocating a larger area to spread the cows out does not reduce damage; it simply makes it less concentrated and less visible and speeds up the rotation.

Once we have the pasture base under control we then need to get supplement use right. The Feeding Pastures For Profit system will provide you with some knowledge and skills that will help you to be confident in your supplement choice. It will allow you to decide on the right amount of supplement to get the most profitable balance between feed inputs and milk production level throughout the season.

The Feeding Pastures For Profit program is not about getting grazing management perfect, it's about having a process that allows you to improve on the system, and change the system based on the changing conditions (good or bad growing

conditions, higher or lower supplement price). Contact Michele Ryan for more details on 55619914.