

Grazing winter cereals can work

First-year results of study on grazing winter cereals found both grain and silage yields were affected



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Reporter

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Mixed farmers looking to cut costs may be able to hit two birds with one stone — by grazing the fall growth of a winter cereal.

“This is a practice that’s quite common in other parts of the world, but it’s one that we haven’t really delved into, likely because we’re a little bit light on the growing season, as well as precipitation,” said Ken Coles, general manager of Farming Smarter.

“It’s a flexible system that makes use of the ground year round, and there’s quite a significant amount (of feed value) that a producer is able to capture. On top of that, they’re able to keep the animals out in the field longer, so the manure is being spread out in the field and they’re saving costs there.”

Working with a producer on irrigation in the Medicine Hat area, Farming Smarter looked at how fall rye, winter wheat, and winter triticale performed after being grazed in fall and winter.

“The crops were planted early August. They were allowed to grow right up until the end of October, and then the cattle were put on them,” said Coles.

“They were grazed throughout the winter, until about April, and then removed.”

First, the team looked at the crops’ survival and found that grazing did affect it — but not as much as might be expected.

“We had 60 per cent survival on the grazed end, and basically perfect survival on the non-grazed,” said Coles. “But despite being down to 60 per cent, we still had a stand that was basically good enough. The results ended up being that we had 1.73 tonnes per hectare of material that was able to be grazed.”

Then the crop was silaged in the summer, and silage yield measured.

“The result was that where we did graze, we ended up with 9.17 tonnes per hectare versus the 7.78 tonnes — or an increase of 18 per cent,” he said.



When Farming Smarter looked at the grain yield from the crop, “there was no statistical difference” between the crops that were grazed and those that weren’t.

“We had 56 bushels per acre (grazed) versus 54 bushels per acre (not grazed),” said Coles, adding yields were “somewhat low” because of lodging.

“The thought there, was that the farmer would have the option whether he wanted to silage the crop or perhaps take it to grain. It’s nice to know that the grazing didn’t negatively impact the yield.”

And though the study is only in its first year, there may be some “value in the practice” for mixed producers who have the right growing conditions — irrigation, low snow cover, and mild winter temperatures.

“So far, based on one year’s results, it seems like a fairly interesting and promising practice.”