

Managing Winter Pastures in 2025

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Photo 1: Ideal stage to graze ryegrass pasture.

Winter is well underway across the region and winter pastures and crops are up and going. Very wet conditions in northern NSW, South-east Queensland, North Queensland and coastal districts have proved problematic, however, generally the feed is quite good, and cows are grazing.

The warm start to winter has presented a few unusual circumstances. The moist, humid conditions have created a perfect environment for grey leaf spot (blast) to infect many ryegrass pastures, regardless of variety. To minimise the damage from blast, it is best to graze to about 5cm residual height, top the pasture if necessary, apply fertiliser and irrigate if required to promote new leaf growth. If left unmanaged, swards will thin out significantly or die, creating an unexpected feed gap. Some of these swards may need resowing to ensure a vigorous sward in spring.

Nutrient deficiencies and pugging have also been evident early in the ryegrass season where rainfall has been constant. Identifying plant symptoms is important before applying fertiliser, as deficiencies may be due to potassium, sulphur and nitrogen in some circumstances. More resowing may be needed if pugging has

decimated the plant population, again to thicken the sward, and prevent broadleaf weed encroachment.

The wet conditions in some regions have delayed planting, with sowing occurring in late May to early June. These pastures will be slower to establish due to lower soil temperatures. However, once established, they should be nipped off to promote tillering, bearing in mind that there may only be 500-600 kg dry matter (DM) per hectare available in the first grazing. Tiller promotion leads to greater yields, sward survivability and reduces competition from weeds.



Photo 2: Overgrazed ryegrass pasture (ryegrass oversown into Rhodes grass)



Photo 3: Underutilised ryegrass pasture

Prudent grazing management also reduces the cost of pasture utilised and improves margin over feed cost. Pasture management is difficult during challenging seasons, but when done well, high levels of profit can be achieved. Grazing leaf and managing residual height are primary objectives of any pasture-based system. Grazing below 5cm residual height will reduce plant energy reserves, decrease yields and reduce plant population. Conversely, high residuals increase plant maturity, decreases quality and increases the risk of sward disease. Grazing frequency is equally important to optimise pasture utilisation. Grazing too often can limit intake and can be a factor in milk fat depression. Grazing too little can reduce seasonal yields, compromise plant quality and increase the risk of disease in swards. Monitoring leaf emergence, allocating feed, back fencing, managing supplements and altering stock numbers are just some of the factors influencing utilisation. When done well, substantial rewards are possible.

C4 Milk experiments at Gatton Research Dairy have shown that grazing annual ryegrass at the two-leaf stage increases total seasonal leaf yield compared to grazing at the three-leaf stage. Leaf utilisation totalled 13,296 kg DM/ha when grazed at the two-leaf stage versus 11,954 kg DM/ha when grazed at the three-leaf stage. The stem proportion of the two-leaf grazing

was around half that of three-leaf grazing: 3,545 kg DM/ha versus 7,018 kg DM/ha, respectively. Feed quality (per kg DM) was consistently high across both grazing strategies. Neutral Detergent Fibre (NDF) increased as the season progressed and was lower in leaf (37-40%) than in stem (42-47%). Metabolisable energy (ME) decreased as the season progressed and was higher in leaf (11.6 – 11.1 MJ) than stem (11.1-10.6 MJ). Crude protein decreased as the season progressed and was higher in leaf (36-29%) than stem (30-24%). Overall, ryegrass is a high yielding and nutritious forage, irrespective of two- or three-leaf stage grazing strategies. On commercial dairies, annual utilisation has been measured at over 14,000 kg DM/ha. Remember ryegrass only grows three leaves before the tiller gets longer and the “fourth” leaf dies. If ryegrass is approaching canopy closure, it needs to be grazed or conserved, be that either the two- or three-leaf stage.

On average, feed related costs represent around 50% of total expenditure of a dairy business. Daily diet costs for pasture-based systems can be as low as \$5 per cow, with a margin over feed cost of over \$10 per cow. Capitalising on temperate pastures and the few cool months we have in Queensland and northern NSW is critical to ensuring a profit across the whole year. ■■

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Photo 4: Conserving excess ryegrass pasture.