

Canola shows grazing potential in high rainfall areas

Mixed farmers in high rainfall areas of southern Australia could be getting more from their canola crops by grazing them to fill the critical late-winter feed gap.

Jeff McCormick, a PhD student at Wagga Wagga's Charles Sturt University funded by the EH Graham Centre, said canola could provide a valuable grazing option in late winter.

"Grazing canola isn't new," Jeff said. "Some farmers have been grazing canola for at least 15 years, but we still don't have the simple rules of thumb that determine grazing strategies on canola.

"It's nutritious, digestible and unlike some grazing brassicas, canola has not shown any poisoning problems if grazed early in the season. Grazing has an impact on the crop's development but canola has shown a remarkable ability to regrow."

Jeff is taking the initial GRDC-support-

THE MAIN POINTS

- Canola provides a valuable late winter grazing option in high rainfall areas.
- Grazed canola recovers well with little significant impact on yields.
- Grazing canola delays flowering and pod set.

ed work done by CSIRO researcher Dr John Kirkegaard on dual purpose canola varieties into other farming areas. Working with standard long season varieties he has found that grazing, even a moderate grazing, has an impact of the future development of a crop but that canola will withstand a "flogging" and come back to produce flowers and set pods.

Poor seasons in 2006 and 2007 have frustrated Jeff's efforts to measure the impact of grazing on grain yield, but he said

John's work suggested that any impact would be minimal.

"I have some data from 2006 that shows pod set was unaffected by grazing, but because development was later in the grazed plots a large number of pods shattered, presumably due to a storm event," he said.

"I'm particularly interested in the impact of grazing on the development of the crop and it is already obvious that while canola will recover well from even heavy grazing pressure, any grazing will delay the onset of flowering and pod set and has an impact on the biomass of the crop at maturity.

Grazing management

Jeff said the ideal time to graze the crop is at the six to seven leaf stage when the plant is just beginning to cover the ground. He said grazing at this stage will delay the onset of flowering and pod set by about a week.

"Ideally you just want to graze the leaves and not the central shoot of the plant but even if this is grazed the crop will recover to produce three to five shoots all of which will bear flowers and set pods," he said. "Heavy grazing pressure can delay flowering by as much as two weeks and that needs to be taken into consideration."

Sown on time – during April – canola will produce the equivalent of two tonnes per hectare of dry matter in late July and early August, filling a critical feed gap. Jeff says that work done by the CSIRO's Dr Hugh Dove suggests that at this stage the crop is about 20 per cent protein and about 80 per cent digestible.

To date Jeff has been working with existing long season varieties.

"John is continuing to work with germplasm more suited to grazing and I'm taking his initial GRDC-supported work into wider farming areas," he said. "Grazing, even a moderate grazing, delays the onset of flowering and pod set and that has implications particularly for production areas where a hot dry finish is the norm.

"So at this stage the strategy of treating canola as a dual purpose grain and graze crop is only recommended for the higher rainfall areas."

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Grazing canola isn't new but we still don't have rules of thumb for grazing management.