

Tough Seasons Project

MLA/AgPro Management

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The project is designed around how to sustainably improve livestock productivity in the face of increasingly variable seasons. Our short length of season makes livestock enterprises highly sensitive to seasonal variation, which can radically impact their output.

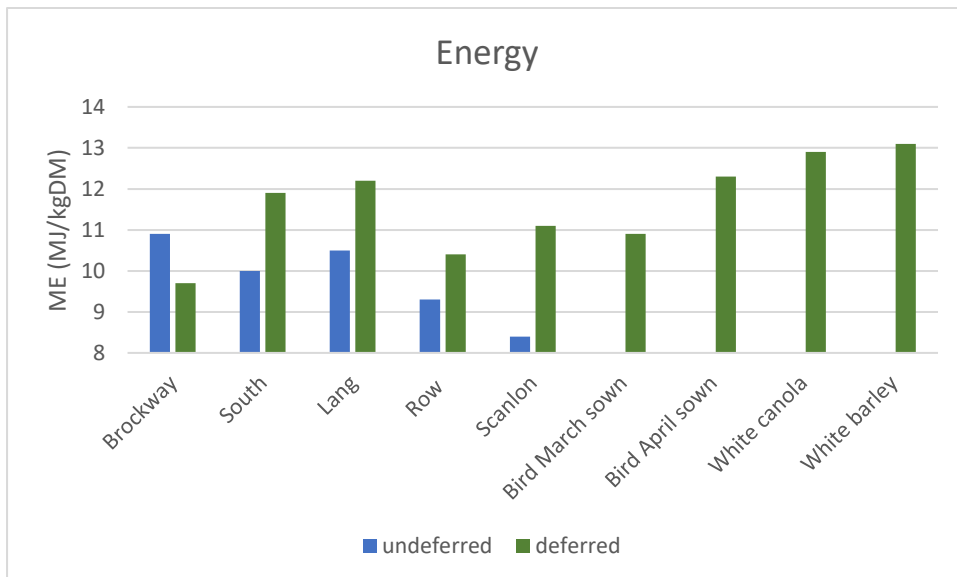
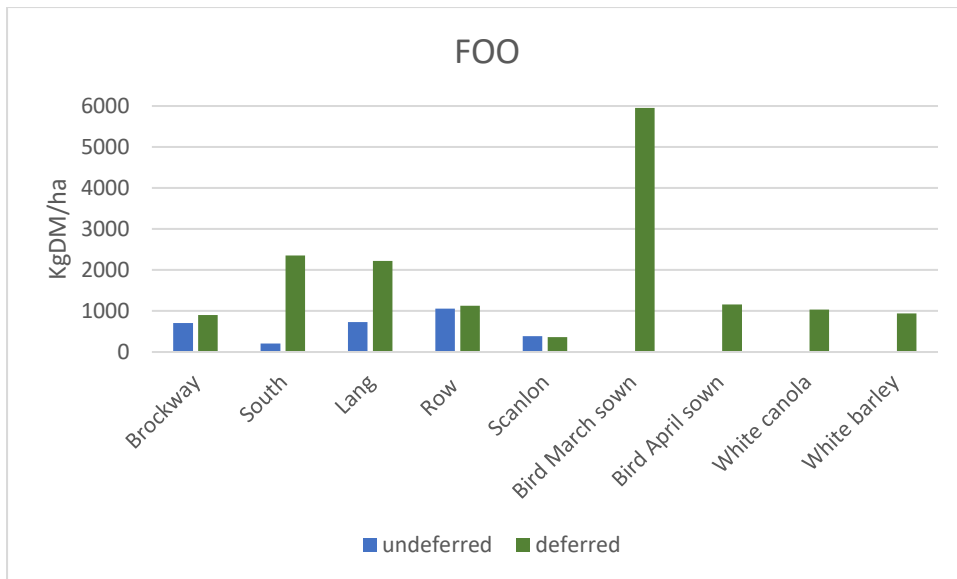
This creates a need for systems which can deal with tough, variable seasons, with effective yet flexible management. The MLA funded demonstration site aims to demonstrate a 'tough season package', showcasing proven management techniques to deal with varying climate and feed gap issues, in order to increase productivity and profitability while reducing risk.

The Tough Systems for Tough Seasons 'package' has two key aspects:

1. Sowing cereals into pastures to bulk up feed for the season (earlier autumn feed and increased autumn/winter biomass)
2. Deferring Grazing, through setting up small deferment paddocks or feedlots/confined feeding (then sowing these for weaning paddocks)

Ed Riggall from AgPro Management is running the project, with 7 sites across the Wagin and Yealering areas this year. The project will continue to run until the end of 2022, testing the system across different seasons and properties. Feed availability and quality will be combined with feed costs, lambing performance and ewe condition to create an economic comparison between the tough system and a normal system without deferment and cereal pastures. Interestingly, of the surveyed producers, sowing cereal with or into pastures is common practice for 9%, and used sometimes by 48% of producers. Another 43% did so rarely. In comparison, 48% of producers used deferred grazing of pastures as normal practice, and 52% sometimes. Producers admitted that use of deferred grazing had increased in the last 4 years, in response to increasingly more difficult season breaks.

Feed tests were taken from the properties as sheep came out of confinement after the break of the season. The data shows that late June feed on offer is 3.5 times higher in paddocks that have been deferred, and/or had cereals added to the pastures. In addition, they had 18% higher energy levels, which is extremely valuable to lambing ewes.



When it came to looking at sheep performance, the tough systems package delivered. Weaner survival increased by 1%, as did marking percentage. This was across mobs of singles, twins and mixed mobs, which made it a little harder to gain a clear picture. What is clear is the impact the system had on ewe condition, with the control mob losing more condition than the confined and deferred mob. This averaged 0.2CS, with control mobs losing 0.4CS and the deferred 0.23CS during pregnancy. In addition, anecdotally lambs and ewes had higher survival

Feed rations were mixed, with some producers feeding pellets and others a combination of grain and lupins. On average, a full feed ration cost \$0.29/hd/day. Confinement feeding and deferring pastures resulted in producers being able to cease hand feeding when the mob came out of confinement, while the control mob on normal pastures required full rations for another 2.5 weeks.

We will be conducting an economic analysis to see the impact on sheep productivity, feed costs, and pasture costs. This will be compared to producer's 5 year average performance, and is expected to be completed by April 2021.