

tips & tools

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Getting started with simple time-based rotational grazing

A rotational grazing system can improve pasture production, utilisation and persistence. Moving stock around a small number of paddocks, grazing each for a fixed time, is an easy way to get started.

Tactics

Four-paddock rotation

To start a simple four-paddock rotation, combine animals from four paddocks, or subdivide a single paddock into four with temporary electric fences. Rotate stock around the four paddocks in a general program of two weeks grazing and six weeks rest.

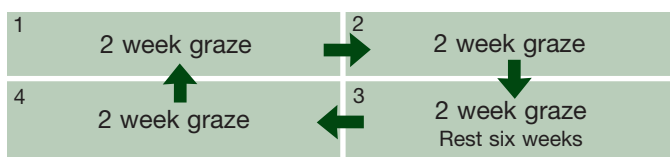
Managers of native pastures have successfully used two-paddock rotations (four-week graze; four-week rest) and four-paddock rotations (four-week graze; 12-week rest).

The rotations may be sped up (one-week graze, three-week rest) after the autumn break to reduce the grazing pressure on new pasture growth, allowing it to bulk up. The rotation can then be progressively increased to a two-week grazing as more feed becomes available.

Stock may need to be moved weekly in spring (one-week graze; three-week rest) to keep pastures in the growth phase for as long as possible. One paddock can be shut out of the rotation for silage. This will enable feed growth in the other three paddocks and easier management.

After a trial period, modifications can be made to the system.

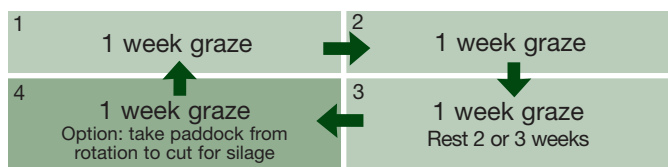
Diagram 1: Four-paddock rotation during moderate pasture growth



Key benefits

- Implementing a rotational grazing system can improve pasture utilisation.
- Rotational grazing can reduce 'patch grazing' and can improve ground cover over summer/autumn.

Diagram 2: Four-paddock rotation during fast growth (in spring)



Grazing method facts

Simple four-paddock rotations can achieve many of the benefits of more intensive grazing methods where stock are moved frequently (every 1–3 days) through a large number of paddocks (up to 20 or 30). There is often a major impact on pasture production and utilisation, particularly of the perennial grasses. Stocking rate increases of up to 20% are possible after switching from set stocking to rotational grazing.

Rotational grazing helps reduce 'patch' grazing and livestock camps, minimises broadleaf weed content, decreases the proportion of annual grasses and improves ground cover over summer/autumn.

The inspection of stock during regular movements often results in better animal husbandry and management.

The amount of plant regrowth depends on how hard plants are grazed and the rest period, with six weeks generally being adequate.

Rotational grazing generally results in less sub-clover content and, over time, greater grass dominance. However, set stocking can be tactically employed in rotational grazing systems to build pasture clover content. This is only recommended after a good autumn break where winter forage is not limiting.

Either animal or pasture performance can be manipulated with rotational grazing. Where animal performance is critical, plan graze periods of one day. For best pasture performance, plan graze periods of no longer than three days to avoid re-grazing or damage to new tillers.

Rotational grazing is best when pasture cover and growth rates are low (winter), as the increase in leaf area enables the pasture to capture sunlight and grow more feed.

Management tips

Setting up

Keep costs low at first by using as much of the existing fencing infrastructure and watering systems on the property as possible.

When to start

Any time of the year, except during lambing. The break of season often provides an ideal time to defer grazing in some paddocks to allow pastures to start growing.

Livestock

Start the rotation with mature dry stock (Merino wethers or steers). These will be less affected if any feed restrictions occur. Alternatively, steers can be run with heifers or sheep and cattle grazed together.

Water

A reliable supply of clean, good quality water is essential because of the increased mob size. Design paddocks to share water points or use a system of portable troughs that move with the stock. If surface water is only available at one end of the paddock, build a laneway to service multiple paddocks. Access to water may not be as important for dry stock during winter, when pasture often contains over 75% moisture.

Fences

Use electric fencing to keep cost to a minimum.

Lambing

Practical experience suggests lamb losses from mismothering can be higher when rotational grazing continues throughout lambing. A period of set stocking (up to eight weeks) during lambing is a useful management option.

Internal parasites

May be less of a problem in rotational grazing systems because livestock are continually moving onto fresh pasture. Worm control is also improved when paddocks are grazed for relatively short periods through summer and autumn.

Weeds

Increased grazing pressure (larger mobs on smaller areas) gives less desirable plants more chance of being grazed or trampled. Weeds can be managed by reducing germination and seed set. Competition from desirable species is also encouraged.

Measure and monitor

When livestock are moved, monitor pasture to estimate the remaining feed on offer. This provides an indication of the degree of under or overgrazing.

Go slow

Simple trialing can be a key to risk management success. The first year can be used to train stock, set-up a routine and build confidence. Seek advice from someone with practical experience during the start-up phase.

What can go wrong?

When stock overgraze a paddock, they damage the pasture base. If there is not sufficient rest period for regrowth between grazing, total pasture production can be seriously reduced. Rest periods should be at least three weeks for rapidly growing pasture, and six weeks at other times. Have a management plan to cover late autumn breaks, wet, cold winters, dry springs and drought and develop skills in feed budgeting.

Glossary

Intensive rotational grazing: Stock are moved frequently (every 1–3 days) through a large number of paddocks (up to 20 or 30).

Acknowledgments

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Further information

For further assistance, contact your local pasture or livestock advisor or go to www.mla.com.au/publications to search for other MLA publications on grazing and pasture management.



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