

HOLISTIC GRAZING MANAGEMENT

Key points

- Holistics can offer both organic and conventional farmers a new set of tools for decision making and grazing management.
- Grazing management is a key area of holistics: the main principle is to rotate stock over pastures for very short grazing intervals leaving behind a considerable amount of dry matter, which builds a layer of organic matter to protect the soil and buffer against drying out.
- This ensures pastures are grazed more evenly – palatable species are not over-grazed.
- Pastures recover more quickly and are more drought tolerant.

Grazing management is a key area of holistics. The main idea in holistic grazing management is to rotate stock over pastures for very short periods, leaving behind a considerable amount of dry matter. This ensures that the pasture is grazed more evenly than under set stocking or a longer interval. There is no over-grazing of the most palatable species and pasture recovery is quicker.

Having high numbers of stock on a relatively small area also ensures some grass is trampled into the soil surface, leaving behind a layer of organic matter and humus which protects the soil. This creates a protective micro-ecosystem for soil biota and buffers the pasture against drying out – pastures are more drought tolerant.

Informative field day

A field day on holistic grazing management was held at Herstell and Alyson Ulrich's property at Cave, South Canterbury, in March 2006. This was held in conjunction with John King's holistic management business, Succession.

The Ulrich's farm two adjacent properties: a 430 ha effective dryland hill sheep breeding farm and a 100 ha irrigated block for finishing lambs and bulls. On the dryland unit they run 2600 ewes and 700 hoggets and aim for 150% lambing. Cattle numbers equate to about 10% of stock units. There is an average 625 mm rainfall and often the summers are dry. The cattle are bought in and are rotated after the sheep on the hill block then finished on the flat.

Stock rotation

Under holistics, the stock on the hill farm are rotated all year apart from lambing; after tailing mobs of 4-500 ewes and their lambs are rotated. There are 5 mobs of ewes and lambs and 2 mobs of hoggets.

The rotation is based on a recovery time of 18-20 days in spring. The sheep average two days in each paddock, with the young bulls coming in after them.

The single lambs perform well under a rotational system after tailing but the twin and triplet mobs appear to be less well suited to rotating before weaning. Herstell is considering increasing the period of set stocking for the multiple bearing mobs.

"Techno" system

The irrigated flats are operated under the "Techno" system: the 100 ha are divided into 40 metre lanes by permanent electric fences. The lanes are then divided by electric tape into "cells" for grazing small groups of bulls (usually 18) or lambs for very short periods (usually two days). The system operates on a 110 day winter rotation.

Recovery time is quick as the electric fencing is put up behind the animals as well as in front and the area is watered in summer by a centre pivot irrigator. They start to sell the bulls in mid-November, with 70% gone by mid January, then lambs are brought on.

Productivity gains

The techno-system has allowed a huge increase in productivity: before using this method, productivity was below 400 kg meat/ha/yr but now Herstell achieves 800 kg/ha/yr.

Holistics and organics

Organic farmer Phil Gray from North Canterbury has adopted the holistic management system and has found the main benefits are improved decision-making and communication. Organics is quite compatible with holistics. After conversion to organics Phil noted that expenses dropped without a major loss in production. Since adopting holistics, and subsequently organics, farm profitability has turned around with a significant profit increase.

For more information on holistic management see John King's website www.succession.co.nz.