



FACTSHEET

Winter forage crops: management after grazing

February 2024

Winter forage crop grazing can cause pugging, compaction and long term soil degradation if not managed properly. This may decrease paddock productivity and can allow nutrients and sediment to enter waterways. Careful management of paddocks after winter grazing can reduce damage to soil structure and loss in productivity, while reducing further environmental losses that could potentially affect water quality.

Key points

- Minimise excessive disturbance of wet soil by animals and machinery.
- Allow soils time to dry sufficiently before cultivating.
- In suitable conditions, sowing a catch crop can reduce nitrogen (N) leaching and increase feed production.
- Resow the paddock in another crop or grass as soon as practicable after grazing has finished.

Post-grazing management to reduce environmental losses and preserve soil structure

- Reduce additional soil disturbance and damage to a paddock by removing stock immediately following the final grazing.
- Don't winter crop or winter graze in critical source areas.



Figure 1: After the final cattle grazing event in a winter crop of kale the cattle were removed from the paddock to reduce risk of further damage to the soil.

- Minimise movement of heavy vehicles on paddocks when soils are wet and vulnerable to damage.
- Vegetated (grass or other) buffer areas around waterways or critical source areas help to reduce the risk of soil and nutrient losses from winter grazed areas.



Figure 2. Kale crop with soil pugging visible where it has been grazed. Soil needs to dry sufficiently before any subsequent cultivation.

Prepare paddock for next crop or return to pasture

- Resow winter grazed areas as soon as practicable after crops have been grazed.
- Soils need to be dry enough to cultivate, but retain enough moisture to allow good seed germination and growth.
- If soils are cultivated or worked when they are too wet, it can cause long-term soil damage by breaking down soil structure.
- Choose the correct cultivation type depending on the soil conditions and what crop is to be sown. Consider direct drilling or low soil disturbance techniques. However, full cultivation and possibly deep ripping may be necessary to break any compacted layers that have formed due to animal treading and pugging. A useful tool to help determine the amount of soil damage is a Visual Soil Assessment (VSA).

- It is important not to over-work soils as this can lead to long-term damage.
- Soil fertility testing can indicate if there are any deficiencies that need to be addressed.
- Assess the weed, pest and disease status of paddocks and try to minimise these where possible using the appropriate pesticides or cultivation techniques.
- Ideally, forage cropping should be limited to two years or less to protect soil structure and reduce longer term damage. This will also reduce the build-up of pests and diseases.

Catch crops

Research suggests that a 'catch crop' (or sequence crop) can reduce N leaching during the fallow period after winter grazing. This is a short term crop, such as oats, sown to provide a protective ground cover and "mop-up" excess N that may otherwise leach out of the soil. It also has the additional benefit of providing extra feed. Research has shown a cereal catch crop can reduce N leaching by up to 40%, but this will depend on the location, the crop type and how quickly it is established after grazing.

- Catch cropping may be worth considering in locations where N leaching is an issue, and appropriate conditions exist to grow a crop that captures and utilises the nutrients that remain after grazing.
- Assess the paddock for suitability for catch cropping. Ideally, the paddock has free-draining soils but take into account topography and cropping history to reduce disease problems and a decline in soil structure.
- Ideally, the catch crop is sown after winter grazing as soon as the soil is dry enough to withstand further soil damage by heavy machinery. Heavier soils may not dry early enough to allow time for a catch crop.
- To ensure the following winter crop has adequate time to grow, use early sown catch crops that germinate and grow at lower temperatures, such as oats or ryecorn. This also allows the catch crop to start taking up N before it is leached from the soil.



- Catch crops may be harvested and stored for use in the following winter.
- When grown in appropriate conditions, a catch crop grown in addition to a winter crop will increase overall feed production from a paddock.



Figure 3. A paddock being cultivated soon after winter grazing to allow for a catch crop of oats to be sown.

Additional information/References

Catch crops after winter grazing for production and environmental benefits.

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Acknowledgements

Beef + Lamb New Zealand would like to acknowledge AgResearch Ltd for their assistance with this fact sheet, which documents some of the findings made in the Pastoral21 research programme.

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