



South West
NRM



Case Study

Grazing Matcher program supporting
better grazing management in
South West WA

Introduction

Persuading farmers to change grazing practices is often inhibited by complexity, uncertainty and a lack of ongoing support.

In 2018, South West NRM partnered with Western Beef Association's Jeisane Accioly and livestock consultants Dan Parnell and Martin Staines to fund and develop the Grazing Matcher program, which helps livestock producers adopt rotational grazing. Additional funding was later provided through Meat and Livestock Australia's Profitable Grazing Systems program.

By 2023, the program had supported 13 groups and almost 100 livestock enterprises. It has attracted additional funding from the Department

of Water and Environmental Regulation's Healthy Estuaries program to run more groups with support from Geocatch, Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee, Oyster Harbour Catchment Group and Peel-Harvey Catchment Council.

The program consists of groups of approximately eight enterprises who meet with advisors eight times over a twelve-month period on each other's farms. Groups stay in touch between meetings using WhatsApp and upon completion, join an ongoing alumni discussion group.

The program is centred around a basic rotational grazing plan based on measurable annual ryegrass growth traits.

Producers are encouraged to graze pastures after ryegrass has developed two to three leaves, stop grazing when residuals are four to six centimetres high, and rest pasture for 35 days. They're also encouraged to have at least 11 paddocks so grazing time does not exceed four days each.

The need for rotational grazing is based on several factors, particularly fodder conservation which is critical in a Mediterranean climate with a long dry summer. Groups are also shown how to make good supplementary feed decisions and monitor animal condition, feed quality and business performance.

A critical aspect of the program has been the networking opportunities, especially with peers. Discussions are open and consider specific circumstances for each producer, who benefit by hearing how others deal with seasonal challenges and see how others manage their farm.

Group dynamics encourage practice change and prompt better management from producers who sometimes admit they could be managing their pastures more effectively.

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Interviews

Interviews with farmers have clearly demonstrated that the program has resulted in significant change.

In 2018, Ken MacLeay, who runs a beef stud in Vasse, said the program renewed his enthusiasm for silage.

"We cut it early, sacrificed volume to get quality and got this tremendous regrowth, so I haven't lost dry matter," Ken said.

Participants who analysed fodder produced in 2018 reported significant improvements in protein and energy content compared to 2017. For example, Ken's 2018 silage had higher metabolisable energy (10.6 compared to 9.5 MJ/kg DM in 2017) and higher crude protein (16.7% compared to 9.1%).

"Quality is really important. We probably lost a bit of focus on that. You've got to make the best and not think that ordinary hay is going to do it,

which we tend to convince ourselves that it will."

The same year, Upper Capel producer Paul Fry saw the benefits of retaining 4–6 cm of pasture residual post-grazing.

"I had previously been of the view that hard grazing was needed to control weeds such as wild oats and capeweed. We would graze to 2–3 cm to make sure all the weeds were 'cleaned up' by cows before moving to the next paddock. However, this program has shown me the extra production you can get from pastures that recover better when grazed to 5 cm."

"Now we get much better recovery in pasture after grazing and much better response to fertiliser because the plant is able to take it up."

Bridgetown beef producers Ann Harris and Graeme Fazey joined the program in 2020, having wanted to implement rotational grazing for a long time. However, it was only after joining that they gained the knowledge and tools to motivate a change.

"Our pastures are very much mixed capeweed, flatweed, ryegrass and clover. Normally, the cows will leave the weeds and overgraze the good plants, which don't recover.

"After joining the program, we decided to make our paddocks smaller (with a single electric wire) to increase the numbers per hectare and move them more frequently to avoid grazing pasture below 4–6 centimetres."

With less space, the cows ate all plants evenly, and the desirable species were more competitive.

"We were able to keep our cows in better condition compared to previous years because we grew more pasture and they ate more, even with the capeweed."

Extending rest periods made a big difference to Glen Mervyn farmers Brendan and Robert Giudici in 2021.

"We were doing rotational grazing before, but not for long enough," Brendan said. "We were doing 21 days. Whereas leaving it those extra days (up to 35) has been really, really big. And if you do break the rules, you can tell when you get back to that paddock."

"We were able to keep our cows in better condition compared to previous years"...

South West NRM Sustainable Agriculture Program Manager, Peter Clifton, has been involved with the program since its inception, providing critical support and funding for its development.

"Grazing Matcher has been the most successful adoption program I have been involved in. Our initial concept was to deliver information in stages and provide ongoing support, rather than hosting one-off events with loads of information and no follow-up. We're proud to have been integral in establishing the program and getting it to where it is today."

