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Media release: Do the maths on cropping this season: DPI expert

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Dairy farmers will need to carefully examine the economics of growing spring crops this season, according to experts from the Department of Primary Industries (DPI).

DPI Ellinbank-based Dairy Extension Officer Greg O'Brien said the importance of cropping this spring was likely to be different this year compared to recent years.

"Normally there is a focus on filling feed deficits due to dry seasonal conditions.

"However this year, being wetter and hopefully with a reliable spring harvest, there is likely to be less pressure to grow crops to fill feed gaps."

"There could be plenty of fodder available for purchase and grain has been tracking at a favourable price. Farmers need to consider if these options are cheaper than taking pasture out of action to grow a crop."

Costing a crop

When costing a home-grown crop, include all the costs such as the pasture foregone, wastage, risk of failed crop/low yield, feed-out costs, conservation, transport, etc. A brassica crop might cost around \$750 per hectare to sow.

Pasture resowing costs need to be considered. If resowing costs \$850 per hectare, the total crop cash costs are now \$1600 or \$266 per tonne, if six tonne per hectare is utilised. This might compare favourably with grain.

On the return side, include the benefit from extra yield from the improved pasture (eg if the new pasture added three tonne more available pasture to the crop yield, nine tonne of feed would be consumed for the \$1600 spent, or \$178 per tonne).

How much crop?

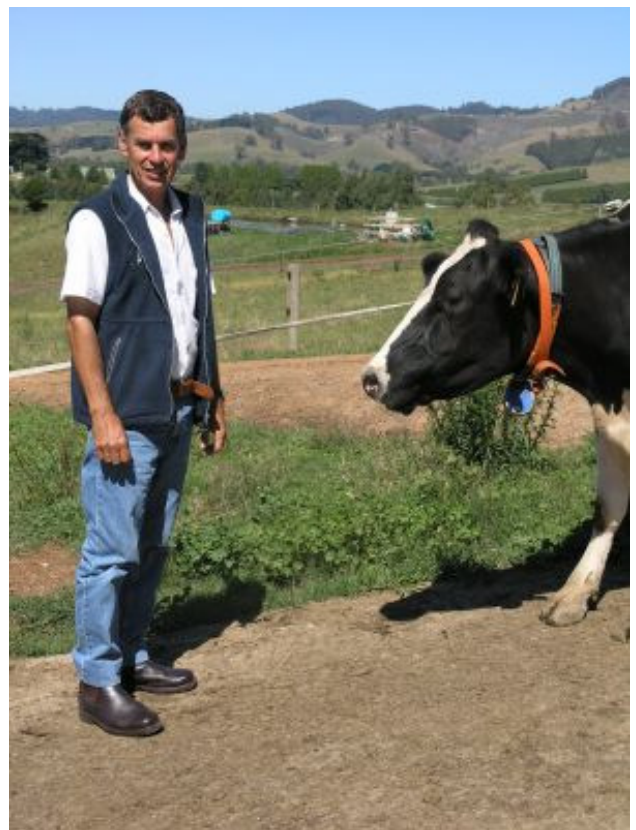
Once a decision is made to crop, consider having the right amount of crop to be sure it can be fully utilised.

"It is much cheaper to direct graze than to conserve and feed back," Greg said.

"So look for suitable grazing options first. Plan for the crop to come on tap at a time when extra feed is required by the herd.

"Work backwards and use planting time and maturity date of the crop to work up a plan. For example, in mid-September, sow a regrowth brassica that takes eight weeks to mature for grazing in mid-December to early January.

"For grazing in the second half of January to early February, maybe sow an area at the same time with a species that matures in 12 to 14 weeks, for example, turnips. This can be followed by grazing of regrowth from the first crop, taking you to



Greg O'Brien: Less pressure to crop this season.

autumn," he said.

The next question is how much area to sow. Yield is a big variable. Check seasonal outlooks for the spring/summer rainfall odds. If the odds favour below average rainfall, plan on a lower yield or higher yields if odds favour above average rainfall.

Paddock conditions and management are also key factors affecting yield.

Later-sown crops are generally more likely to have lower yields due to temperature and moisture being less favourable for establishment. Wet spring conditions may make it difficult to sow a crop early, requiring a different plan.

The table below provides an indication of how the resultant yield can influence the number of days grazing per hectare.

Ball-park feed supplied by rain-fed crop

Crop	Days per ha of crop * (low yield t DM/ha)	Days per ha of crop * (good yield t DM/ha)
Regrowth Brassica	8 (3)	17 (7)
Turnips	12 (5)	25 (10)
Millet	10 (4)	15 (6)
Sorghum	10 (4)	20 (8)

** per 100 cows fed 4kgs DM per day*

If you are looking to crop on your farm, and would like some assistance in working out the most appropriate crop and area to sow, contact your local dairy extension officer with DPI, dairy farm adviser or agronomist.

More information, including contact details for dairy extension officers, can be found in DPI's [Services to Dairy Farmers](#).

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