Light grazing of stubbles no cause for concern

Farmers can safely graze their cereal stubbles, lightly, over summer with no impact on yield in the subsequent crops.

This is contrary to concerns that the trampling of stubbles by livestock reduces water retention, causes surface compaction and incorporates weed seeds, which in turn decreases crops yields.

Research undertaken through the Grain & Graze 2 project assessed the impact of sheep grazing over summer on crop residues, soil quality and no-tillage crop establishment and yields.

The project, which is funded by the Grains Research and Development Corporation and the Australian Government’s Caring for our Country initiative, found that light grazing over summer had no effect on crop yield.

University of WA agronomy lecturer Ken Flower, who has been involved in the project, said most farmers had moved to a zero/reduced till farming system that involved full residue retention to maintain favourable soil structure and high yields.

“This has been a major concern for livestock producers who remove the stubble through grazing,” Dr Flower said.

“However, we have been able to show that light grazing mainly loosened and flattened the stubble residue and had little effect on the amount of stubble.”

Dr Flower said results also showed that grazing had negligible detrimental effect on soil properties and grain yields.

“Therefore, it is safe to say that sheep producers will not be disadvantaged and their no-till crop gross margins will not be impacted by light summer grazing with sheep,” he said.

The trials, which were run over four years, were undertaken by the WA No-Till Farming Association at Cunderdin and Meckering and by the Facey Group at Wickepin and Yealering.

The stocking rates and grazing intensities used in the trials were about two to four dry-sheep equivalent to the hectare for a total of about 150 to 200DSE-days/ha over summer.

Dr Flower said overgrazing could result in soil erosion and reduced crop yield.

“This was shown at one site, which was put to pasture for a year, where relatively heavy grazing over winter and summer caused surface crusting, reduced water infiltration and lower crop yield,” he said.