

FARMLANDER PUBLICATION

April 2015

Taking on hill country: Tonic reaches new heights

As sheep farming is pushed further onto hill country areas, the need to provide higher quality feed in these environments becomes more crucial. Tonic plantain is able to enhance the development of uncultivable hill country to increase finishing capability. Brooklands Station Manager and Farmlands client, Simon Hull, explains how Agricom's Tonic has been instrumental in providing the station's hill country a new lease of life and productivity.

The 1500 effective hectare station in Alfredton, Wairarapa runs 7500 ewes, this year producing 10500 lambs, including 2000 replacements; as well as 380 breeding cows and 600 dairy heifer grazers. Currently Brooklands has 70 ha of flats sown with plantain, 100 ha of aerial sown plantain and has plans for another 30 ha in autumn 2015.

For Simon, Tonic is a tool that has delivered increased growth rates and improved carrying capacity of stock through summer and autumn. This allows him to compete with grass based flat land systems.

From what was originally only a small part of a pasture mix, Tonic has been transformed into what many now consider a strategic forage. It is suited to a range of soil types, rainfall zones and other climatic conditions. Tonic is unique as it is an upright cultivar in all seasons and has similar autumn and winter activity to perennial ryegrass. Tonic can increase the ME (metabolisable energy) of the forage available on hill country, as well as giving some drought tolerance, and it recovers a lot quicker than many other species.

Brooklands data on growth rates for a full year (FarmIQ) showed an average growth rate of 260 g/head/day on plantain, with little difference between the flats and hill country. Simon says "prior to Tonic, only 5% of trade lambs were killed off the ewes. This season, due to the growing size of the plantain stand, the weaning draft has increased to 20% at 17.4 kg. Alongside this we have lifted our works ewe weight 5 kg/cwt through lambing on plantain."

Aerial sowing is not without its challenges though, and Simon recommends selecting areas for development early. It is good practice to get a soil test at least 12 months prior to sowing, and to start managing the selected blocks with chemical topping to get rid of weeds and thatch early by either putting through a summer fallow or a crop (e.g. summer turnips) to break down the thatch and allow another weed spray.

Brooklands has been successful with both spring and autumn establishment, but in his environment Simon has found the benefit of autumn establishment is that the plantain is up and running for spring lambing. Autumn establishment can however be at the mercy of the rain and temperature cooling can slow establishment if Tonic is planted late.

Adding clover to the Tonic mix adds ground cover and promotes nitrogen fixation and cycling, but it still requires maintenance fertiliser to enhance and maintain a productive plantain stand. Annual spray maintenance of the hill country development area is needed, along with planned use of grass weed and thistle control.

Overall, Simon has observed healthier stock, with improved growth across the board. In terms of persistence, Simon is keeping an open mind as his stands are reaching 18 months old. He is

impressed with the great growth and utilisation Tonic plantain offers, and is looking forward to being able to utilise the added 30 hectares sown this autumn.



Left: Simon Hull on Brooklands Station

Right: Developed land (left) versus undeveloped land (right)

ENDS

Agricom

Christchurch Office

P O Box 3761

Christchurch, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 (3) 341 4580

Email: info@agricom.co.nz