

Optimising groundcover

Practical grazing decisions

Grazing pressure has a direct impact on groundcover. When pastures are overgrazed, leaf area is reduced, plant regrowth slows, bare soil is exposed, and the risk of erosion increases.

Effective grazing management balances livestock feed requirements with pasture recovery and soil protection, helping to maintain groundcover and support long-term productivity.

Key drivers of groundcover loss

Effective grazing management considers grazing intensity (how heavily stock graze), grazing duration (how long they remain in a paddock), the length of rest periods between grazing events, seasonal pasture growth rates, soil type and condition, and the placement of watering points to encourage even stock distribution.



Managing grazing by soil type

Management should be adapted to soil type, with higher groundcover maintained on sandy soils to reduce wind erosion and grazing avoided on wet clay soils to prevent pugging and compaction.

Addressing soil constraints can also help improve pasture growth and groundcover.

Pasture management practices that support groundcover

Pasture management practices that support groundcover include rotational grazing to allow pasture recovery, fencing to land class to protect fragile soils, and using perennial pastures for year-round soil protection.

Careful management of annual pastures, maintaining species diversity, and effective weed control can also help maintain groundcover and improve resilience.

Core grazing principles

- Match stocking rate to feed availability
- Increase rest periods during slow growth seasons
- Protect vulnerable paddocks before groundcover drops
- Use rotational or strategic grazing to improve pasture utilisation and recovery
- Act early, prevention is easier than repair.

Seasonal grazing decisions

Groundcover is the key year-round indicator. Maintaining >70% cover (and close to 100% on slopes) supports soil health, water infiltration and pasture persistence.

Autumn (break of season)

Target: ≥ 3 cm pasture height (~800 kg DM/ha), >70% groundcover (100% on slopes)

- Rest paddocks after opening rains to boost growth.
- Avoid grazing new seedlings too early.
- Build litter and soil cover.

Winter

Target: 3-5 cm pasture height (1000-1500 kg DM/ha)

- Use rotational grazing to maximise pasture growth.
- Maintain residual pasture levels.
- Avoid grazing wet soils to prevent pugging and compaction.

Spring

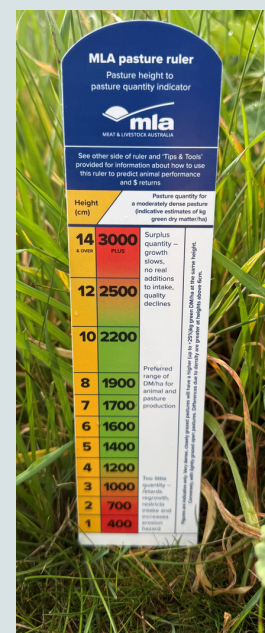
Target: 5-12cm pasture height

- Allow some paddocks to reach ~14 cm to build litter.
- Aim for 2-3 handfuls of litter per 0.1 m^2 .
- Use tactical grazing to manage rapid growth.

Summer

Target: >70% groundcover (100% on slopes)

- Retain standing dry feed and litter.
- Protect paddocks during low-growth periods.
- Maintain feed reserves for late summer and autumn.



A pasture ruler can help support better grazing decisions and help protect soil and groundcover.

Recovering low groundcover

Where groundcover has declined, reduce stocking pressure immediately and completely rest severely degraded paddocks.

If pastures fail to recover, consider re-seeding or oversowing, control dominant weeds such as capeweed, that may indicate soil decline, and repair erosion sites to restore surface cover.

Early decision triggers

Act early when groundcover begins to decline, pasture height falls below seasonal targets, feed budgets indicate future shortages, or seasonal forecasts suggest dry conditions ahead.

Management options

Management options may include selling or agisting stock, using containment feeding, and securing fodder reserves before shortages occur.

Tips for maintaining groundcover

- Aim for >70% groundcover year-round
- Monitor paddocks regularly using quadrats
- Manage watering points to reduce localised overgrazing
- Build healthy soils through pasture diversity and soil biology
- Plan grazing rotations ahead of time
- Use feed budgets to look 3-6 months ahead
- Act early, prevention is easier than repair.

Further resources

For further tools, resources and support visit

hf.landscape.sa.gov.au/GroundcoverManagement



This project is delivered by Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board and jointly funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and the Government of South Australia.