

RIVER WALL GRAZING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The AOEP conducted a trial of using sheep to graze the river wall for the grass management rather than using a mechanical machine. The following comments were made:-

Advantages of using Sheep over Machinery

1. Natural
2. Sheep will graze the grass to encourage it to tiller and produce a better root structure. This in itself will render the grass sward stronger with better 'holding' effect on the river wall enabling it to withstand the effects of over topping better.
3. Non- invasive on other species. Sheep move around quite steadily grazing in harmony with other vertebrates, invertebrates and birds that inhabit the river wall environment.
4. Sheep can be moved on and off the river wall area easily to enable rotation of grazing and not over- grazing at any time.
5. Sheep grazing does not leave any grass cuttings on the wall. The sheep also naturally fertilise the grass as they mow.
6. Sheep can get everywhere to graze where machinery maybe limited by its size and lack of maneuverability.

Disadvantages of using Sheep over Machinery

1. Very little, other than it requires a small to medium sized flock to be owned/leased. With limited grazing availability there are quite a few flocks that are moved regularly to different grazing areas and this is a way in which the river walls can be grazed, if no flock is owned on site.
2. Initial fencing cost to electric fence off the saltings so that the sheep can't get onto the saltings resulting in occasional drowning of sheep and damage to the vulnerable saltings vegetation.
3. Sheep will not eat thistles, so where there is a thistle issue they will have to be dealt with separately.

Advantages of using Machinery

1. No flock required

Disadvantages of using Machinery

1. Disruption though noise and people to other vertebrates, invertebrates and birds.
2. 1-2 pretty intensive grass cuts that leave the grass cuttings on the walls. Sometimes the intensive grass cutting can leave bare patches of exposed wall where the grass has not tillered properly and this leaves the wall defence vulnerable if there was overtopping. This was seen very clearly in the Dec 13 event when the breaches on Iken wall occurred where recent mechanical grass cutting had left large bare patches of earth leaving the defence useless when the overtopping occurred.
3. Large Annual COST for mechanical cutting and cost of Machinery

Conclusion

The net result of a year long period of trialling sheep grazing vs. machinery cutting of the river wall (flood defence) is that wherever possible the use of sheep is preferable.

Sheep grazing is a natural process which has little impact on the environment and results in the grass being maintained in top condition.

The sheep are rotated on and off the river wall grazing as the grass is grazed down. This is a managed process by the shepherd to make sure that the sheep always have good grazing which in turn means that the river walls are never overgrazed.

Jane Marson Bsc

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