

Managing Livestock in No-Till enterprises

Progressive farmer Carl O'Donoghue has taken an innovative approach to balancing the livestock and no-till cropping enterprises on his mixed central Victorian farm, and so far, he says it seems to be working.

Carl, who runs a family farm at Kamarooka (40 kilometres north of Bendigo) with his wife Dinah and his parents, has seen the benefits of no-till farming since first adopting minimum till practices in 2004. But by the same token, Carl is convinced running sheep on his 1150 hectare property (plus 130ha agistment) has its rewards and with careful and considered paddock management he said his no-till system and the health of his soils needn't be compromised

Innovative

To satisfy the feed demands of his sheep while maintaining his no-till cropping system, Carl has introduced alternative practices such as double cropping and grazing cereals.

In the past few years Carl has double sown up to 70 hectares on his farm. Essentially, this involves inter-row sowing a pasture in a crop.

"In a paddock we want to leave in pasture I'll dry sow cereal in early April (usually a tall long-season wheat such as Wedgetail) then I'll go over it again and sow a pasture in between the rows," Carl explained.

"It's a way of trying to recoup some of the input costs that go into growing a pasture – by having a cereal there."

But according to Carl, his main reason for having a go at double cropping was to improve his ability to grow a pasture crop.

"We started because we were having trouble sowing a reliable pasture, or small seeds out the back of the air-seeder," he said.



"Because we had gone no-till and weren't incorporating the pasture seed."

The challenge of growing a reliable pasture crop initially motivated Carl to attempt double cropping, but it was new farm machinery purchased to suit his minimum till cropping system that made the idea seem more feasible.

First steps

It was in 2004 when Carl took the first steps towards no-till cropping, purchasing an air-seeder.

The double shoot Horwood Bagshaw system with a nine metre bar, Primary Sales Superseeder points and Agmaster press wheels was set on 350mm row spacings in 2009 and with a two centimetre auto-steer system fitted to the tractor, there was not much stopping Carl from giving double cropping a go.

"Auto-steer takes some of the risk out of sowing pasture this way," he said.

The machine is nudged across 175mm and the pasture is sown in-between the cereal rows through the main sowing boots.



And so far Carl says the system seems to be working “quite well”.

Of course, as with everything in farming, there are challenges and Carl admits having to go over the paddock twice can be a “pain”, but he said he was working to overcome any potential problems.

“By harvest the rye and clover have dried off and, if it’s a good year, the lucerne plants are starting to come up through the crop so we need to harvest before they set seed,” he said.

Double seeding and grazing cereals, which Carl says he does “a bit”, are just two practices he has adopted in a bid to successfully manage a livestock business in conjunction with a no-till cropping system. And while he has had some successes he admits his system is “not perfect”.

Trade off’s

“There are trade-offs,” Carl said.

“We don’t always have as much standing stubble as we’d like if the sheep have been on it, but sheep have been good to us in recent times ... and having that dual income source keeps the bank manager happy.”

To avoid issues such as soil compaction and ‘hair pinning’ that can result from stubble being knocked over by stock, Carl said he tries to minimise grazing on stubble, but he said this can be difficult, particularly as his numbers increase.

To strike a balance, Carl said paddock management was important. He said considerations about weed control (what chemicals will be used at sowing time), the amount of rain received and



how the soils and stubble are holding up helps determine how long he is likely to graze a particular paddock.

“If too much stubble is getting knocked down, the soils are being chopped up or there’s been a substantial rain, we shift them out,” he said.

“How we prioritise maintaining stubble over summer against its value as feed for our stock will depend on the season and it changes each year.”

Benefits

Carl pointed out that his stock can help with weed management.

“If a paddock is getting resistance issues we either grow hay for several years to reduce weed seed numbers or graze it to try and clean it up a bit. But we also try to spray as soon as practical.”

Despite plans to increase his stock numbers and eventually have a self-replacing Dorper flock, Carl said he would continue to crop no-till and try to mould his system to best maintain its integrity.

“Many benefits have come from having a no-till farming system – moisture conservation, efficiency and improved soil health. Our soil has more earthworms and at certain times we even see termites in cropping paddocks. “We are also getting our crop in on time,” Carl said.

“We sow by date now and if it goes in dry it goes in dry, and so far that’s been advantageous at the end of the day.”

Find out more

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