

The right mix

Motivated by strengthening lamb and wool markets, sheep farming experienced a quiet resurgence in the Mallee last year, but even before 2011's record high prices made national news, the McQueen family was already ahead of the game.

The owners of the family farming business, which encompasses properties at Kooloonong and Nyah West, have been combining a sheep enterprise with a no-till cropping system for the past six years and thanks to the soaring lamb and wool prices seen last year, there is little doubt the decision to diversify has been justified.

Reintroducing sheep

Brad McQueen, who operates the business with his father Roger and sister Lisa, said fitting a livestock enterprise around a predominantly broadacre cropping business, did, at times, prove a logistical challenge, but he said economically the benefits outweighed any hassles.

Like most of their neighbours, the McQueen family dramatically scaled down their sheep business when the seasons were dry and lamb and wool prices were weak. However when Lisa returned to the family business about six years ago, things in the livestock department changed.

With a well established interest in livestock management, Lisa took a leading role in developing a prime lamb and wool business that would fit around the cropping enterprise.

Today on the 5790ha property, where approximately 5640ha are devoted to growing wheat, barley, lupins



and canola, the family runs around 720 Merino ewes which they join to Poll Dorset rams to produce first cross lambs.

Depending on the amount of feed available the stock numbers fluctuate, with the family adopting an opportunistic approach to their livestock business.

Last year about 150ha of pasture was available for their sheep to graze, but when feed is in short supply

or stock need fattening prior to marketing, containment areas are used.

The sheep also feed on stubble, or more specifically grain losses (fallen heads, spilt grain) in harvested paddocks but Brad said, particularly on lighter country and on hills, careful management was needed.



Protecting paddocks

“We have some concerns about erosion on hills” said Brad. We still have a lot to learn and need to become better at protecting these more sensitive areas, but it’s pretty hard to stop sheep grazing on hills – they love camping there” he said.

However, Brad said the potential for sheep to bury weed seeds, and problems with soil compaction were his main concerns.

He said he subscribed to the notion that sheep caused soil compaction and could bury weed seeds - particularly brome grass on the sides of hills but he said erosion could be minimised with good management practices.

Despite the risks, Brad said there were also gains to be made when sheep were allowed to graze stubble.

“Basically they are using our lost grain and at the same time benefitting from a good protein source (particularly if grazing lupins). Essentially we are able to maximize our grain production.”

Brad said the business generally didn’t suffer too many problems with stock over grazing paddocks.

“Fortunately we have plenty of paddocks that they can graze before they get too bare,” he said.

“There are potentially more issues with compaction.”

For this reason the McQueen’s sheep do not graze at Brad’s Nyah West farm where the soils tend to be heavier and risks associated with compaction are higher.



And even after 2011’s grain quality destroying deluge, Brad said the sheep were not permitted to graze on un-harvested crops.

“In 2010/11 grain prices were too good not to harvest,” he said.

Maintaining a balance

If managed with care, Brad said he saw no reason why a no-till cropping regime and a livestock enterprise could not harmoniously function side by side.

“Financially they complement one another and environmentally the system can work providing it is carefully managed and the soil types are taken in to consideration,” he said.

“It’s about making the sheep fit around the cropping system which is our core business.”

Brad said when the sheep had cleaned up most of the grain heads in a harvested paddock, or if they were causing too much damage to paddock hills, they were shifted to the next paddock. He said the cropping system benefited too.

“In 2009 when we had a lot of heads on the ground we noticed that in the paddocks where the sheep had cleaned them up there were less mice.

“It was the same, but to a lesser degree, in 2010.”

In terms of paddock management, Brad said he was of the opinion that sheep didn’t actually eat many of the stubble stalks. More so it was the grain losses and heads on the ground that they predominantly ate, along with summer weeds.

“They can be a good strategy for managing summer weeds, or weeds post-spraying,” he said.

“When they are grazing we find we can delay spraying in certain paddocks, giving us a better chance get over all our land. We put the sheep in our lower priority paddocks that we plan to spray last.”

“It’s about making the sheep fit around the cropping system.”





Labour and logistics

Logistically, Brad conceded that sheep could create some headaches for farmers. Fortunately on the McQueen farm, Brad's sister Lisa takes care of the livestock side of things.

“High input costs are a challenge and we've got to be sustainable.”

Brad pointed out there were benefits to having a sheep enterprise. He said as well as returning organic matter to the soil, sheep could be used as a brome grass management tool – planting weed seeds in grassy paddocks that then could be sprayed out to better effect the following year.

But obviously, as dedicated Mallee cereal farmers, Brad said cropping would remain the core business.

Having implemented a no-till cropping regime in 2002, the family has focused on refining their system to essentially become better farmers and grow better crops.

“We're more bang on with our summer weed control now, but it is the best money we spend,” he said.

“The system (no-till) has made us more in tune with what's going on in our paddocks – it's made us better farmers, but also better business people more adept at cost squeezing.”



Brad said the family also puts a large emphasis on crop nutrition and, as always, there are plans to further refine operations with machinery and infrastructure upgrades high on the agenda.

“Over the next five years we will work towards adding more legumes to our rotations and improve our inter-row sowing,” Brad said.

“High input costs are a challenge and we've got to be sustainable.”

Of course, the important financial bottom line is where Brad said the addition of a livestock business is proving most beneficial.

“But it's all about balance,” he said.

“It works for us, but not every farmer wants to spend any spare time they have chasing sheep.”

“We're more bang on with our summer weed control now, but it is the best money we spend”

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