

Making a mixed system work

According to no-till farmer Adrian Drum, combining a livestock operation with a modern cropping enterprise requires careful forward planning, but he said it can be done.

While he sees himself predominantly as a grain grower, Adrian also produces wool and prime lambs from a relatively small mob of Dohne sheep on his Banyena farm.

Diversity

Adrian said that while including livestock as part of his operation they did, at times, make things harder. There were benefits from retaining “a bit of diversity” and sheep did provide another income source that shouldn’t be underestimated.

“I love no-till but I do have concerns about an increasing ryegrass problem,” he said.

“There are purists who won’t do hay, won’t run sheep and refuse to do anything but crop and throw more chemical at it, but history shows that anything that relies on only one tool in the box generally fails.”

In paddocks with weed issues, Adrian said he had the flexibility to be able to attack them from different directions.

“Since taking up no-till I think we’ve become better at controlling, identifying and managing weeds. With problem weeds I can always fall back on vetch as a way around it.”



The right mix

With the help of one full-time employee, Adrian grows canola, wheat, barley, faba beans, chick peas, lentils and vetch on his undulating land. The property, which includes blocks spread up to 30 kilometres apart, features a range of soil types watered by an average long term rainfall of 427mm. Importantly, the farm also has a lightly timbered block suited to grazing sheep.

Despite eagerly following no-till practices for the past five years, coming from a wool growing background, Adrian was inclined to retain some livestock on his land, although he said he was careful to keep it small.

“It would just get too hard to manage if we let it get too big,” he said.

“I originally grew wool but when I looked at diversifying into fat lambs I changed from Merinos to the South African Dohne breed.”



Adrian said while his Dohnes currently produced less wool than his Merinos, he thought they could be pushed further, had high lambing percentages and better survival rates.

“They are tougher and have more meat on their bodies,” he said.

“All the weathers are sold as fat lambs and the ewes have lots of twins and even manage to keep triplets alive.”

Flexible approach

To accommodate the nutritional needs of his sheep Adrian sows around 100ha of vetch each year and allows his stock to graze his smaller paddocks and around house yards on his farm.

“When I sow my vetch I don’t know what I’ll use for grazing, what I’ll make into hay or green manure and what I’ll harvest,” he said.

“It depends on how the season plays out, but I sow enough to allow me to be flexible.”

A creative approach to grazing sees Adrian’s sheep make use of growth on parts of the farm that can’t be cropped.

“You’d be surprised how many sheep can survive in a house yard,” he said.

“It saves mowing too.”

It is an understandable strategy in an area where there are now very few sheep, and as a consequence, fewer maintained fences and gates.

“I try to keep the stubble standing so I run the sheep light”



In addition Adrian said his system is workable because his March joined, July/August lambing mob usually have feed around this time of year – when they most need it.

“I might add a bit of hay (to their diet) just to see what’s going on. If they want it they’ll eat it,” he said.

There are two containment areas on the farm but to keep paddocks from blowing he prefers to simply run less sheep and to be careful not to graze blocks too hard.

Protecting soil

With only a small percentage of the farm used for grazing, Adrian said managing his livestock can be a challenge.

“The workload does the head in sometimes,” he said.

“It would be definitely easier without them.”

Indeed there is rarely a break on the Drum farm with sheering scheduled for the first week of January, right after harvest.

“The shearers have their run too so we need to fit in with them,” Adrian said.

As an avid believer in the benefits of keeping stubble standing, Adrian keeps the livestock side of his business to no more than 500 head. And in a bid to avoid soil compaction he will only lightly graze his cropping paddocks, and in some instances, not at all.

“There is always a bit of conflict,” he said.

“Some say sheep and stubble don’t go together. I try to keep the stubble standing so I run the sheep light and depending on what crop the paddock is going into next season I might not use the paddock for stock at all.”





Adrian said he believed that his soils benefited when last season's stubble was kept in tact.

"I try to keep most of it (stubble) for wind protection, he said."

There were farmers who burnt their stubble last year and it was amazing how the soil dried out. There is a big difference between having it and not having it."

"Sheep can cause compaction especially when it's been wetter"

Adrian said while he believed grazing could be detrimental to stubble retention and contributed to soil compaction, he wasn't sure about the suggestion that sheep increased weed

problems and made them harder to control.

He said a compaction trial being run on his farm would hopefully answer some of these questions.

"Sheep can cause compaction especially when it's been wetter," Adrian said.

"I try to pull them off and put them onto the timber (paddock) whenever it's a bit wet. I'm not sure about the suggestion that they bury weed seeds though."

Challenges

Adrian said the recent wet weather revealed a few challenges for his cropping system and adding sheep to the mix did complicate things.

"You need to watch your system more and plan ahead further," he said.

"You can get cornered if you thrash the paddock more than the system allows."

Adrian said the solutions to most

problems were out there but farmers needed to ask.

"Having others to talk to and learn from gives you more confidence to tackle it on your own," he said.

And irrespective of whether or not a farmer ran stock Adrian said he held high the no-till philosophy.

"It keeps the wind erosion at bay, improves water use efficiency and the soil," he said.

"But you also need to consider balance.

"I'm not sure if stock complements the system, it's more of a juggle really. It would be easier to be only cropping from a management perspective but I think it is more exposing in the long term."

"You can get cornered if you thrash the paddock more than the system allows."

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