profile

Robert and Jennifer Egerton-Warburton

Korellup Farm, 25 km south-east of Kojonup

Annual rainfall: 550 mm, growing season 450 mm

Farming system

Farm size: 2600 ha

Enterprise mix: 50% cropping, 50% livestock

Soil type: Duplex

Crops/pastures grown: Canola, barley and wheat

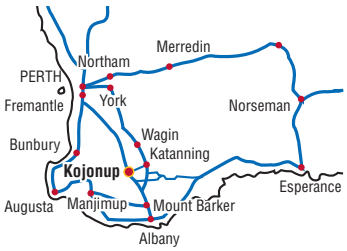
Typical rotation/s: Cereal/canola for four years and pasture for three years.

Livestock numbers: Current 6000 ewes, at peak 9000 ewes

Breed: Merino Tech Merinos

Average paddock sizes: 60 ha

Water sources: Earth dams



Keeping flexible and adopting technologies key to Rob's farming success

Lauren Celenza, Extension Officer, WANTFA

Farming system

Robert Egerton-Warburton said producing sheep and cereals were more successful with one another. Treating each enterprise like it's equally important rather than a supplement is how he has turned his multi-enterprise farm into a thriving business. He even runs a flower seed business, Lucinda's Everlastings, with his wife and daughters, which has been just as successful. While many WA farmers are doing the opposite, this year Rob plans to put in a little less crop and add a few more sheep.

'We will probably put 10–15 per cent less crop in due to the rotation and increase the stock numbers.'

With prices of sheep still strong and the grain market not looking that great, Rob said they have the flexibility to change their system to benefit from those market changes. Being 50 per cent crop and 50 per cent sheep, it's easy for Rob to move numbers around year to year to take advantage of markets. This year he may go to 60 per cent sheep and 40 per cent grain and benefit from good sheep prices.

ABOVE AND LEFT: Rob and daughter Lucinda moving a mob of merino wethers.

Rob has been grazing crops for seven years now, experimenting with stocking rates along the way.

'It hasn't affected the yield and it can help reduce disease pressure because stock reduce the canopy,' he said. 'I have experimented with it a lot and found that sheep trampling the ground increased weed germination so I reduced numbers and have now got the weed management part right.'

Cropping

Rob has been a No-Tillage farmer for 15 years and uses chaff carts for weed management and livestock feed. Wheats grown on Korellup Farm are all Australian Premium Wheat (APW) varieties. Rob chooses varieties with the highest possible disease resistance as viruses such as Yellow Spot and Septoria have been a burden to wheat crops, and he chases canola varieties that are high yielding and resistant to Blackleg. Rob's yields are typically around 2 t/ha for canola, 4 t/ha for barley and 3.5 t/ha for wheat.

Over several years frost has become a worsening issue on the farm.

'We never used to get it, but now we have it every second year, so we may have to look at improving frost management' Rob said.

Of his cereals, Rob grows 80 per cent wheat and 20 per cent barley but is thinking of growing more barley because of its production benefits.

'I may plant more barley because I have had more weed control success with it and I have better crop topping options with it,' he said.

Despite its success Rob can only grow feed barley as too many screening and colour problems have stopped the grain from going malt in the past so he grows it for the feed market, as well as for his sheep.

Rob uses a Morris Concept 2000 seeder bar, seeding at 90 degrees with everything on autosteer, and everything down the tube, including 100–120 kg of Agstar® and up to 150 kg of Urea topdressed. He also hopes to use the new pre-emergent herbicide Sakura® this season to try and tackle some ryegrass resistance.

At harvest last year Rob used chaff carts for the first time and was very happy with the results.

'We found it worked really well as a weed management and livestock management tool. It's great for placing chaff in piles for easy access by stock and a great tool for decreasing the weed burden. For us chaff carting has a 60 per cent grazing and 40 per cent weed control benefit.'

This year he plans to grow more GM canola.

'We usually grow 40 per cent of our canola GM, however, we will move to probably 80 per cent because we have seen a significant yield increase using it here and excellent weed control, especially in a wet year like last year.'

Grazing management

Rob runs two large mobs of 3000 ewes which he moves around the farm as required for most of the year. For the three months around lambing (June for crossbred prime lambs, July for Merino replacements) he splits them up into mobs of 200–300, grouped according to their condition score, and feeds them accordingly. The mobs are then moved into crop paddocks to graze until after lambing. Before putting the sheep on a crop, Rob first sprays the crop with selective herbicide MCPA and puts the sheep on it four days later.

'The sheep walk between the crop and eat the weeds; if you get the [stocking rate] numbers right it can be really good for the crop.'

Several years of crop grazing have allowed Rob to experiment with stocking rates. Their numbers have changed over the years ranging from 12 Dry Sheep Equivalent per winter grazed hectare (DSE) to 20 DSE.

'We have found that 17 DSE is a good number for us. It's easy to manage and economical.'

Rob follows the Lifetime Ewe Management principles to maximise lambing and improve ewe performance.

Grazing the crops lightly hasn't affected Rob's yields, in fact it helps reduce disease pressure by reducing the canopy.

'Sheep are great at getting rid of wild radish. We used to have a lot of it and it was becoming resistant, however now we don't have a problem with it,' he said.

At around the 10th of August, or when the first node appears, Rob stops the sheep grazing the crops.

'Keeping them in the crop paddocks until then gives us an opportunity to clean up the pasture paddocks and it has allowed us to increase our stocking rate by 20 per cent.'

To manage stubbles Rob now takes the time to cut them short at harvest ('about the height of a beer can') and he tries to keep his pastures with a minimum 800 kg/ha of cover by moving the sheep between paddocks regularly. As soon as a stubble paddock is ready for them, the sheep are moved off the pastures until they are green again. This has had a significant effect on how quickly Rob's pastures respond.

Supplementary feeding includes chaff cart piles and silage which also decreases the weed burden. Rob also utilises poor performing patches of crop by cutting them into hay.

At the break of the season he has a 'sacrificial' paddock which he puts all the sheep in, like a feedlot to let the crops and pastures get established.

'If the season starts out too wet we will leave the sheep in pasture paddocks longer but the sheep don't seem to walk where it's too wet so it isn't usually an issue,' he said.

Rob uses a tub grinder to mix up lupins, barley, wheat and silage. He then trail feeds it out as a loose mix.

'Our farm produces more biomass than it does yield and grazing crops utilise that biomass; it's been very successful.'

interesting facts

- Rob's father started Agrimaster®, and his brother David now runs the business.
- Rob has travelled around the world studying agriculture as a Nuffield Scholar.
- Rob is on the Merinotech, Sheep CRC Board and Chairs the Sheep Industry Leadership Council.
- He is a sixth generation farmer (the second on the Korellup Farm).

RIGHT: Rob grows canola with perennial pasture lucerne which has shown very promising yield and pasture benefits.

BELOW: The family grow Everlastings which they sell as seeds to many WA outlets.

Sheep genetics

Rob says genetics are extremely important to the success of his sheep flock. His family used AMS Merinos until about 20 years ago, when they switched to Merinotech Merinos. They are bred on an index using Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) meaning Rob can know exactly what the sheep will end up like. The flock have an average of 19 micron and have an exceptionally good lambing percentage of 97 per cent and are robust, easy care sheep.

'I don't mules and I don't get fly strike or fleece rot. The breeding has also helped me increase the stocking rate. I can call up the Merinotech breeder and order 20 rams with a certain index. I ask for traits like high net lambs weaned, good eye muscle and rapid growth.'

Merino genetics have gotten so good Rob is now moving away from the prime lamb technique and going to just Merino genetics because he wasn't seeing much of a difference between the cross bred lambs and the merino lambs.

'We have got the best sheep genetics industry here (Australia)—I don't know why more people aren't utilising this.'

Soil condition

Soils are very important for Rob; he grows a lot of perennials, renovates pastures and uses lucerne to improve them. Non-wetting soils have become a real issue on Korellup Farm in recent years. It has started to affect areas that never had the issue before and areas that were previously prone, have become highly un-wettable. Rob has tried using SACOA's Lure H_2O, which he said had some effect but didn't improve the soil enough.

'Because we run large mobs, most paddocks will only have stock on them for a maximum of one month in a year, meaning the impact is short term and we don't have compaction problems. We plough some paddocks and incorporate lime if needed. We plant lucerne in spring and have it for two years before putting it back into crop. It has been very successful in bringing back poorly performing paddocks.'

Enterprise mix

Rob says cropping and livestock are synergistic with one another and didn't believe the negative impacts where even close to the benefits.

'It's hard to imagine one without the other, livestock production would be difficult without cropping and vice versa—they each make the other more profitable. I don't see stock as having a negative impact on cropping at all; the benefits outweigh all the perceived disadvantages. If you apply all the latest technology and research to livestock farming, as many farmers have in cropping, it's equally profitable.'

Department of Agriculture and Food
GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Crop Updates 2012

Lime unlocks yield potential

MANY GRAIN growers are being robbed of crop yields and profits by not liming their paddocks appropriately—or not at all.

The Department of Agriculture and Food's Agribusiness Crop Updates, supported by the Grains Research and Development Corporation, was told a lack of soil sampling and targeted applications was stealing crop potential.

A department research partnership with Precision SoilTech and the Federal Government's Caring for our Country initiative is working directly with growers to achieve recommended surface and sub-surface soil acidity levels to improve crop performance.

Department project leader Chris Gazey and his team are working with 19 grower groups in the Northern and South West Agricultural Regions to improve soil health and crop productivity. The Department is helping growers to help identify current pH values in both surface and sub-surface soil and develop management plans to achieve target pH profiles.

Low soil pH (soil acidity) costs Western Australian farmers $400–500 million each year in lost yields, with average losses of 8–12 per cent for wheat and more for sensitive crops like barley and canola.

Mr Gazey said that after years of research in the Avon region much was known about the benefits of liming, but he warned that the recommendations had changed in recent years.

'Our surveys have shown many farmers are still using the old 1 t/ha blanket application approach every 10 years, which produces an inconsistent result,' he said.

'The current best practice recommendation generally starts at 2 t/ha, with a further treatment within five years based on strategic applications, according to soil pH requirements determined by regular soil testing to 30 cm.

'Ideally, applications should be guided by a comprehensive 10 year plan.'

Farmers participating in the research project who have their surface soil tested, also have the opportunity to get their sub-surface soil tested at no cost by the project partners.

'It's really important to measure the soil profile by testing the 0–10, 10–20 and 20–30 centimetre soil layers, as topsoil pH is a poor predictor of midsoil pH,' Mr Gazey said. 'Knowing the soil pH allows growers to calculate more precise liming rates that will achieve the soil pH targets. We advise soil testing every 3–4 years or getting around about 25 per cent of the farm each year.'

Mr Gazey also recommended growers know what quality lime they were purchasing.

'High quality, fine lime will be more beneficial than lower quality or course lime, so it's important to adapt the liming rate accordingly to produce the desired benefit,' he said.

Although surveys have revealed many farmers cease liming when farm incomes fall due to seasonal conditions, Mr Gazey stressed that strong soil health was most important at these times.

'When dry conditions persist, soil health is most important to help plant roots access deeper moisture,' he said. 'We've done a lot of work in the past and we now have the science and the foundations to verify lime requirements for WA crops.'

The project will continue this year with further soil sampling, reviewing results, farmers' intentions and workshops.

Grower groups in the Northern and South West Agricultural Regions interested in participating in the program should contact Chris Gazey at the Department's Northam office.

info For more information visit www.agric.wa.gov.au/2012cropupdates