

Sheep integral to cropping program

Through the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, a project looking at combining no-till farming with a live-stock enterprise is occurring across northern Victoria. The project aims to identify strategies being used by growers to maintain the integrity of their no-till system, while maintaining their grazing enterprise.

Location: Tungamah

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 1400 medium wool Merino ewes, Merino stud for replacement rams and 200 South African Mutton Merino (SAMM) cross ewes joined to White Suffolk

Cropping: wheat, barley, canola and brassica

Machinery: JD 560 tractor, Horwood Bagshaw PSS 10m tyne seeder, RTK GPS

Integrating livestock with no-till cropping may present some challenges, but Tungamah farmer Josh Buerckner sees them as fitting well together.

Josh says he is passionate about both parts of his enterprise and believes they complement each other.

"Sheep may cause a bit of compaction, but I am prepared to wear it because they do a job for me and have well and truly been paying for themselves over the last 10 years," he said.

Josh and Jenny's 1300 hectare farm at Tungamah, south west of Yarrawonga, has been in the family for two generations. They share farm another 200 hectares about 40 kilometres away and Josh also works part-time as an agronomist with I K Caldwell.

"Sheep are pretty good weed management tools, especially in the summer, as they clean up stubbles



and problem paddocks, ryegrass wise, which is the bane of our existence," Josh said.

"The cropping program allows me to carry a few more stock as I allocate 100 to 150ha of grazing wheat into the rotation. That allows me to run my stock through that tough winter period."

Josh heavily stocks the grazing wheat at 15 DSE for about 30 days. Nutrition in mid-winter is pretty important for the sheep as there is usually not a lot of feed around.

"I lamb in July and August which puts the ewes under a fair bit of stress at that time. Putting them onto a grazing crop is great," Josh said.

"The one thing I found when grazing wheat is that you have got to have your trace elements, such as magnesium, otherwise you can run into grass tetany issues."

As soon as the sheep are removed from the crops, Josh says he "hits the wheat hard" with nitrogen.

"It has been a good system so far, but I'd like to have five years behind me before I say yes or no (about his system's success). But at this stage it is working well."

After the 2011-12 harvest Josh was surprised to find his grazing wheat actually averaged the same as his non-grazing wheat (around 4t/ha).



Prior to the 2012-13 harvest Josh said he expected his ungrazed wheats to out-perform his grazed varieties, but not by a lot.

In 2012 Josh sowed 450 hectares of canola, 500 hectares of wheat and about 80 hectares of barley.

He also lambed down 1400 medium wool Merino ewes and 200 South African Meat Merino (SAMM) cross ewes joined to White Suffolk.

"SAMMs have similar micron wool but you don't get the volume," Josh said.

"They are a really long animal with a real meaty back-end to them. The lambs even look super with the White Suffolk over them."

In an effort to 'run things a bit harder,' Josh has recently put more emphasis on the cropping side of his business.

"I bought a bit more machinery and, with a bit more capital investment, have upped the ante," he said.

Sowing is carried out using a 1980 model John Deere 560 tractor pulling a Horwood Bagshaw PSS 10 metre tyned seeder with press wheels behind the parallelogram system.

"The tractor is an older model, but it has got the horsepower I need and is reliable," Josh said.

"I retain stubble and inter-row sow with the help of a RTK GPS (2cm). It's amazing the amount of stubble we can get through with the tyned machine, even without coulters.

"If you can get your height, or straw length, right (40cm seems to be optimum), that seems to be the key. In 2012 we were sowing through some four and five tonne stubbles



and didn't have too many dramas."

Harvesting is done by a contractor using the latest equipment which spreads the residue from five tonne crops evenly across the full width of the comb, but Josh said if the trash spreading system wasn't 100 per cent, sheep could be useful.

"I suppose if you start stacking up three or four years of five tonne stubbles on each other, it might present a few challenges, but straw height and your residue management are two keys to no-till cropping," Josh said.

"Our crop rotation is generally canola, then two wheats, back to canola for five or six years and then to pasture for as long as they're productive.

"On our lighter country, it might be canola, wheat, barley then back to canola again.

"With my pasture country, if there is reasonable pasture on it, I will leave it out while it is still ticking over. As soon as it becomes unproductive, I bring it back into the rotation."

With 15 years of no-till, soil structure is getting to where Josh wants it to be. Cultivation is something he now tries to avoid.

"It is a good feeling sowing through a nice stubble. It's just a perfect environment for things to germinate," Josh said.

"Canola especially loves having that bit of cover even though issues with slugs and things like that might crop up in the future.

"We are sowing nice and early with our canola; into warm soils. which helps young seedlings to get up and going, so I think I am better off having the cover than not having it."

Find out more

For further information about the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, including opportunities to get involved, contact:

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