

Sheep plus crops equals flexibility

Through the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, a project looking at combining no-till farming with a livestock 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 incorporating a grazing enterprise.

Location: Mount Mercer

Farming operation: sheep/cattle and cropping (70:30)

Livestock: 7000 sheep, comprising Merino ewes and first cross ewes plus a few cattle

Crops: Wheat, barley, canola and linseed

Machinery: John Deere 8130 front wheel assist tractor, Sow-Ezy double disc air seeder

Sheep grazing and cropping are run in relative harmony at 'Camberley', a traditional undulating grazing property at Mt Mercer, 30 kilometres south of Ballarat.

The system provides the Cameron family with the flexibility to adapt to changing markets and paddock needs

Owned by brothers Peter and Andrew Cameron and their father John, the 1500 hectare family farm features undulating clay loam soils – 50 per cent volcanic and 50 per cent sedimentary soils – with fairly low fertility and low pH.

They run 7000 sheep for wool and lamb production, as well as a few cattle, and crop about 500 hectares.

Peter looks after the sheep while Andrew and his son Rob, primarily focus on the cropping side of the business.

Cropping was introduced to the farm in the early 1980s, primarily to open up



the soils and renovate the pastures for the grazing operation.

"Someone recommended that we grow Haifa white clover for seed and that was our first serious cropping enterprise," Andrew said.

"That was diving right into the very deep end because it is one of the hardest things to grow and harvest.

"We had a lot of problems with weeds in the clover and decided to grow cereal crops to clean the paddocks up in order to grow clover again. At about that time the clover market fell due to over production and we were no longer competitive."

By that stage, the Camerons had developed expertise in cereal cropping and began growing wheat, barley, canola and linseed. In those early years, they were using a traditional cropping system – ploughing the paddocks and burning the stubbles.

"We don't have a strict rotation", Andrew said. We are flexible and opportunistic."

The linseed is under-sown with white clover to bring the paddock back to a pasture base. Perennial rye or some other grass is then direct drilled into the newly established white clover to begin the pasture phase. Livestock are used for stubble management.



Rob said running sheep with a cropping program works because they complement each other.

"Putting the sheep on the stubbles helps with weed control, gives the pastures a rest and adds to their diet," he said.

"It's another place for the sheep to graze and pick up the lost grain. It saves us the cost of spraying and cuts down on chemical use, which is becoming a huge problem across Australia, especially with herbicide resistant ryegrass. It saves us some time as well.

"If a pasture is going downhill and not pulling its weight, we just put it back into crop to renovate it and open up the soil."

Rob said having the crops also helped rid paddocks of intestinal worm eggs.

"By having the paddocks in a crop rotation we are getting rid of the worm eggs and avoiding a huge build-up of eggs in the soil," he said.

By carefully working the two enterprises together, Rob said they were prolonging the effectiveness of their chemicals by delaying the onset of resistance.

More importantly, according to Andrew, the system enabled them to spread their risk.

He said the area's high rainfall made cropping risky but because they also have the livestock enterprise, they usually had something to sell that was worth something.

"One year we had a terrible annual ryegrass problem in a wheat crop so we sprayed the whole crop and grazed it," Andrew said.



"Being prepared to take such drastic action saved the paddock for the future. It also saved us from making a total loss because of the benefits to our livestock.

"We're not totally dependent on our crops, so even a total loss can be turned around to be some form of success."

It was the 10 year Millennium drought that motivated the Camerons to move away from conventional cropping practices.

"The linseed clover crop failed due to the lack of rain so we began rotating the crops more," Andrew said.

"The crops did well because the drier weather suited cereals.

"During that time we gave up burning stubbles because we thought the stubble mixed with the soil would improve it."

"We started ploughing in the stubbles using an offset disc and were still sowing conventionally. It produced fabulous results in soil improvement."

Andrew said as a family they have developed a system that seems to be working for them.

"Our system gives us the flexibility to make decisions that suit the enterprise."

Find out more

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

BCG

Phone (03)5492 2787, www.bcg.org.au

Grain & Graze 2

www.northernvictoria.grainandgraze2.com.au

