

Finding the balance between no-till and sheep

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 incorporating a grazing enterprise.

Location: Werneth

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 1200 Merino ewes joined to Border Leicester rams to produce first cross ewes and weathers

Crops: canola, wheat, barley and oats

Machinery: John Deere 8410 tractor, Simplicity airseeder fitted with 12mm knife-points and Knuckey press wheels on 300mm row spacings



Although Western District farmers Grant and Troy Keating are dedicated to the no-till cropping concept, they have managed to maintain their livestock enterprise and continue to see it as an essential part of their business.

In fact, this desire to maintain their livestock enterprise, but also to expand the cropping side of the business, is what catapulted the brothers towards no-till. They saw clear benefits, one of the most attractive being, less time on the tractor!

"We used to do three passes over a paddock before we would sow it – ploughing it and running the harrows over it a couple of times to break up the clods," Grant said.

"We wanted to put in more crop and no-till was part of our time management," Troy added.

"Now it's all done in one pass."

Grant and Troy run the family's 570 hectare farm at Werneth, midway between Ballarat and Colac. Under the business name of Keating Brothers, they also share farm another 290 hectares seven kilometres south of the home farm, as well as 280 hectares at Cressy, where their parents now live.

Like many southern Victorian farmers, the brothers combine sheep with grain growing, with Troy looking after the sheep while Grant takes the lead with the cropping.

They crop nearly 900 hectares over the three farms, last year sowing 400 hectares of canola, 200ha of wheat,

200ha of barley and 100ha of swan oats.

Conventional cropping practices were used until 10 years ago when they moved to no-till with the purchase of a John Shearer combine with super seeder points. Five years later they changed to a Simplicity air-seeder fitted with Knuckey press wheels.

Troy runs 1200 Merino ewes across all three farms.

The ewes are joined to Border Leicesters rams to produce first cross ewes and wethers. The wether portion is sold off as quickly as possible, while the ewes are sold off as one-and-a-half-year-olds.



While the prime lamb market may have come back a little, selling first cross ewes to prime lamb breeders has been very lucrative and helps to spread the risk of cropping.

"I have had to eat my hat for a few years," Grant said with a chuckle, "but it's a big wheel."

Troy said once harvesting begins, there is not usually a lot left in the pasture paddocks and the sheep are turned onto the stubbles.

"There is a lot of good feed in the oats and barley stubbles," Troy said.

"There is always a small amount of grain on the ground and the sheep help to keep down any weeds over summer.

"We couldn't leave sheep on a pasture paddock right through summer or, come March, there would be nothing left. It would take 12 months to come back."

"Getting the sheep off the paddocks helps to give them a spell and, with a bit of summer rain, they will be ready for the sheep again when it comes time to sow."

Although Grant acknowledged the positive impact sheep have on their business, he believed allowing them to graze stubble paddocks was a compromise.

"I do all the sowing and I can see the difference where the sheep have and haven't been," he said.

Apart from the stubbles, the sheep are run on separate paddocks from the crops, although each year a fresh pasture paddock is brought into the cropping program as part of a renovation process. On the flip side,



if a paddock is not performing with a crop on it, it will be sown to pasture to spell it.

"To convert a pasture paddock into cropping we generally run the disks over it to bust up grass clods before sowing," Grant said.

"Apart from that, the plough is only used to do a few firebreaks. That's about it."

Troy and Grant agree that their sheep are much more than a tool to thin out stubbles and harvest residue. Sheep give them a second income stream, increased flexibility and the ability to match the paddocks to their needs.

Find out more

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

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