

A passion for farming

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.

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Location: Newbridge

Farming operation: cropping and sheep/cattle

Livestock: 1700 Merino ewes joined to Border Leister rams and 900 Merino ewes joined to Poll Dorset and White Suffolk rams, plus a few cattle

Crops: canola, wheat, barley and vetch/field peas

Machinery: John Deere 7930 tractor, John Deere 6330 tractor, Vaderstad Seed Hawk air seeder fitted with tynes on 250mm row spacings



Jason McDonald's farming journey has been unconventional, but he is passionately devoted to primary production. Under his management, his mixed farm business at Newbridge has grown and prospered.

As an enthusiastic no-till farming convert, Jason, who farms with wife Melissa and father Kevin, clearly gets more enjoyment from the cropping side of his business. However, he maintains his livestock enterprise because of its many benefits to the farm.

"If your grain fails, sheep generally pay for next year's cropping," Jason said.

Unlike most farmers, Jason didn't grow up on a farm, but his passion to become a farmer was strong. After completing a TAFE course, he moved to Newbridge in central Victoria to work

with his uncle on what had been his grandparent's farm.

At the time (1989), the 1100 hectare family farm was predominately sheep based. Only about 200 hectares were sown to crop using an old 20 row combine and Chamberlain tractor.

"The valley has red volcanic soils with a lot of rock and runs down to heavy, loamy clay as you get down towards river," Jason said.

"We would mainly burn, work and sow back then."

After the unexpected death of his uncle, Jason invested in a bigger 27 row combine to manage the workload.

"As we slowly improved our gear, it became easier to put crop in than to shear the sheep," he said.

Jason started to move away from traditional cropping practices 10 years ago with the purchase of a Shearer trash drill and started to do a bit of direct drilling.

Then, with the help of his father Kevin, who had given up his work in the building trade to help on the farm, Jason expanded the cropping side of the business, leasing 400 hectares with the next-door neighbour and share-cropping a further 240 hectares.

This motivated the purchase of a Vaderstad Seed Hawk eight metre airseeder fitted with tynes on 250mm (10 inch) spacings.

"We have sown with it for the last three years," Jason said.



"Most of the stubbles are now direct drilled after we take the sheep off. The odd paddock coming out of the pasture phase is worked up for canola to break up the clods, but with this volcanic ground, it comes up beautifully."

Jason said although he began no-till cropping to save time, he now considered himself a 'real convert'.

"Our crops are three or four bags better with the press wheels than conventional crops," he said.

"It is a parallelogram system with the first tyne ripping deeper and sowing the fertiliser. The second tyne is offset and places the seed on a ledge. The press wheel ensures good seed-soil contact, better germination and heavier crops."

Complimentary to the cropping, the farm continues to support a 1700 head self-replacing Merino sheep flock joined to border Leicester rams to produce crossbred ewes. A further 900 Merinos on the leased property are joined to Poll Dorset and White Suffolk rams. The family also run a "few" cattle as well.

The sheep are used to graze stubbles and Jason doesn't find it causes any compaction issues.

"When you grow a couple of thousand acres of crop, they are not on each paddock for long," he said.

The crop rotation is generally canola-wheat-barley but there are plans to bring vetch or field peas into the rotation.

"Canola, wheat and barley are still performing, but you have to feed them," Jason said.



"We are trying to get a bit of free nitrogen with the vetch and peas coming into the system."

After six years of cropping, most paddocks generally go back to a clover or lucerne pasture.

"On average, we would sow 80 hectares of pasture each year, although, over the past couple of years, the area we crop has gotten a bit bigger," Jason said.

"It depends how the year is looking. If it comes in dry, we sell a few more sheep and put another paddock of crop in."

The farm also has 120 hectares of irrigated land, half of which is cropped while the other half goes to pasture.

Jason said he will be sticking with no-till farming practices, and sees no reason that the system can't work on a mixed farm.

"Since we have been no-till, our crops are as good as, if not better than before, and we use less fuel," he said.

"The only downside is that we spend

more on chemicals. Then there's the problem that if we clean the paddocks too well, there won't be the sheep food.

"Years ago you couldn't kill everything and sheep would actually fatten in the stubbles. Now there's virtually nothing for them unless you chuck something out the back of the header."

Jason said that sheep would remain an integral part of the business.

"If you could guarantee a good year I would be all crop now, but sheep have their place," he said.

Find out more

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

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