

It's all about management

Through the Northern Victoria Grain & Graze 2 program, a project looking at the practice of grazing winter crops is occurring across northern Victoria. The project aims to increase the knowledge and skills of farmers engaging in, or considering, this practice by providing them with information about suitable crops and varieties, crop agronomy, grazing management and the effects on livestock and crop production.

Location: Lawloit

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 1500 self-replacing Merino ewes; 500 mated to terminal sires

Crops: wheat, barley, canola, vetch, medic

Mean annual rainfall: 450mm

Soil type: mixed

Alan and Donna Bennett run a tight ship on their farm at Lawloit, between Nhill and Kaniva, Victoria.

While Alan might be the mainstay of the enterprise, he says that without Donna the place wouldn't run nearly as well.

She looks after the books, helps with the livestock and is available for all sorts of general chores. A farmer's daughter, she loves the land, is good with livestock, and has the right temperament: calm and relaxed.

As Alan says, "She gets it"

Daughter Ellen also contributes. She is passionate about the sheep, while her younger brother, Luke, is into cropping and machinery.

The cropping system

Like many farmers, Alan is modest about the farm's achievements, but what emerges is that his system is precise, technically advanced and the result of careful consideration.



Crops grown are canola, wheat, barley, faba beans and some vetch.

Between 20 to 25 per cent of the farm is devoted to lucerne, a fodder crop of inestimable value to the success of the enterprise.

Lucerne is direct drilled inter-row with barley at cropping. Mostly dormant over winter, it responds to summer rain and provides feed in the dry months.

Once established (sometimes a difficult process) lucerne can last for years: Alan cites a crop which has endured from 2000 to 2013.

"To control weeds, you can sacrifice the feed value of the lucerne, with a winter

clean spray," he said.

"Within days, it turns white, but not long after new shoots appear from the root mass in the ground, and you get great spring feed.

"It's amazing stuff!"

After persevering with legumes, Alan is convinced that his decision to grow lucerne is the correct one for his part of the country.

"Lentils were too unreliable. We decided to go down the lucerne path and haven't regretted it."

Part of the farm consists of poor, non-wetting white sand which grows silver grass.



To combat this, the practice of delving involves peeling up the underlying clay and mixing it with the sand.

After a couple of cereal crops, lucerne can then be established and chemicals used to eliminate the silver grass and provide excellent feed, thus transforming productivity.

Extra winter feed can then be produced by inter row sowing cereals back into the lucerne.

Livestock

The Bennetts run 1500 self-replacing ewes, buying their rams from Glen Lea Park at Pinnaroo.

"We chose them because they're big, fast-growing and plain, with quality wool. We also prefer polls," Alan said.

Lambs are shorn in March, when they're eight months old, and then in September and again in the next March to get back in line with the main shearing.

Alan said the results have been very positive.

"We've been amazed how much wool they cut," he said.

Crossbred lambs are dropped in the autumn with the lambs mainly sold into the spring sucker market.

"We're not above buying in a few sheep if prices and the season are right," Alan added.

Grazing crops

Three wheat varieties are grown on the farm: early sown Rosella; Correll and Wallup.

Crossbred lambs graze the Rosella for extra winter feed, but uneven grazing can be a problem.



When feed is scarce, sheep are fed barley," Alan said.

"This year (2013), they were kept off the lucerne because of the low summer rainfall and kept on barley and canola stubbles.

"Stock containment is used only in an emergency."

The future

Alan is very clear about the three essentials for successful farming in general: firstly, getting things done on time; secondly, paying attention to detail; thirdly, making every attempt to control costs.

"In our case," he said, "it's all about management and becoming more efficient at growing better quality feed.

"We have to try to get as much out of the system as we can."

Technology offers part of the answer.

Alan cites three major elements in the improvements made to the farm system. The new three bin air seeder

which enables him to "do everything (urea, fertilizer and seed) at one pass"; the newly-purchased press wheels and use of dual banding have been crucial in increasing efficiency by allowing inter row sowing.

He remembers that he was initially sceptical about precision sowing: now he can't imagine cropping without it.

Asked about the future, his response was concise and definite: "It's about management, about running a business. Nostalgia may be a temptation, and we all enjoy a bit of that, but looking forward's the key."

Find out more

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

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