



Getting things right

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: Boort

Farming operation: cropping and beef cattle

Livestock: 155 breeding cows, Hereford and Angus, mated to Charolais

Crops: wheat and lucerne

Mean annual rainfall: 180-355mm

Soil type: black self mulching



For Richard and Fiona Cockerell farming is a shared enterprise and a shared passion.

The couple, who produce grain and beef, believe in Australian agriculture and its future, the quality of its produce and the lifestyle that goes with it. Their outlook is positive.

“Agriculture offers unbelievable advantages and opportunities,” Richard said.

“It may be a legalised form of gambling, but we do it for the love of it. We like getting things right.”

Livestock

The Cockerell’s approach to beef production is “natural” and “holistic,” and they aim at producing a good quality product.

Targetting the domestic market, they have a regular relationship with a nearby abattoir and achieve B butt grading for their meat.

“Some of our beef ends up in top Melbourne restaurants,” Fiona said.

After calving in autumn and spring they turn off the animals when they reach between 380 and 400kg (at 10 months).

Calves are control fed. A mechanical mixer produces a high-energy combination of lucerne pellets and “lolly mix”: snakes, jubes and cake mix.

Machinery and infrastructure

The Cockerells believe in buying their own machinery as opposed to employing contractors.

Their figures tell them that purchase of high-quality machinery is more economic in the long term. The efficiency of their new rake has already saved them money.

They also take pride in their under-cover stock yards.

Before they purchased the farm, it ran deer. They gutted the deer shed and established a state-of-the-art set of cattle yards; the envy of those who see them.

“Rain or shine, it’s great to be under cover,” Richard said.

“Our new scales are also worth the money. We lost the old ones in the 2011 flood. It was a blessing in disguise.”



The cropping/ livestock system

"Cattle are our top priority," Richard said.

"Given a half decent year, we can cut our crops for hay. Given a good year, we harvest them for grain."

Fiona is "chief header driver" on the Cockerell farm.

"Living so close to Boort, I can drive the load in and be back ready for the next one," Richard said.

"We don't plan to grow wheat for grazing. The water's too expensive."

But Richard said they "have to make every acre count."

Under contract to a local dairy farmer, in September/October they produce haylage.

Within five days of mowing, hay is baled at 25-30 per cent moisture. Plastic wrapped, it ferments and provides palatable feed for the cows.

The paddock is then irrigated, and a cleaner, second cut of hay achieved in mid-December.

Thirty four hectares of irrigated lucerne, direct drilled with rye grass, is grown on the farm with one load per month contracted to a nearby chaff mill. This year, they made five cuts.

Their system has evolved through both practical experience and listening to the advice of others.

Previously growing Wedgetail wheat, they changed to Scout after conducting their own mini-trial. Finding little difference in yield, they chose Scout for its greater disease resistance and because it made hard quality at the silo.



Fiona said that they look, listen, talk to everyone and anyone.

"You have to look out to discover what can be done," she said.

"We listen to other farmers and agronomists, go to field days, then apply the information to our own situation. Sometimes it's just trial and error."

As breeders, the Cockerells are both pragmatic and dedicated.

"Cattle are very smart; I love 'em," Richard said.

They aim at a stress free environment for their animals. Laneways have been constructed though the property, and motorbikes are banned. Cows are carefully monitored, and ones that are "not nice" are culled.

Fiona, who is the main cattle buyer said you need to be careful because a "bad animal" can influence the others.

"We buy in breeding stock and cows with calves at foot are specially treated. We hand rear calves if need be, and keep our breeders as long as we can."

A farming future

Richard and Fiona agree that their system in particular, and the agricultural lifestyle as a whole, is just what they want for their four young children.

"As well as a means of making money, we believe in farming life. We've worked out a system that suits us. We're part of the local community and we see the positives in what we do," Fiona said.

"And you need to think outside the square," Richard added.

"We just want the chance to have a crack."

Find out more

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

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