

A mixed system for a consistent income

By mp|media solutions, for the Victorian No-Till Farming Association

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 cropping system while also running a grazing enterprise on their farms.

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Location: Cooke Plains

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: 1600 Merino breeding ewes plus first cross lambs

Crops: barley, wheat and canola

Mean annual rainfall: 370mm

Soil type: non and hard-wetting sands and loams on limestone flats

South Australian no-till farmer Neville White reckons that mistakes make valuable teachers on the land.

"I've learnt a lot from the mistakes I've made myself," he admits.

"But if you learn from the mistakes of others too, you can definitely save yourself time."

Neville is the third generation in his family to farm at Cooke Plains near Tailem Bend. There's more than 60 years of White farming history in the area, including 41 years on the 'Illowra' property, which Neville and wife Jan now run.

Like his grandfather and father before him, Neville knows efficiency and knowledge are vital when it comes to succeeding in agriculture. And he's happy to draw on the collective experiences of family, fellow farmers, farming networks and agronomists to improve his cropping and livestock enterprise.



The cropping system

Neville started his no-till journey in the early 1990s; built on the back of trash stubbling where he and dad Murray worked the stubble back into their paddocks before sowing the next crop.

About half their 2000-hectare property is cropped each year. They sow the loamy soil on limestone flats to barley, canola and wheat.

"Any of the bigger croppers in this area

now are definitely no-till," Neville says.

"You learn a bit by talking to everyone and looking over the neighbour's fence – our neighbours were no-till two or three years before we were."

Neville says a reduction in labour is a major benefit to minimum and no-tillage farming.

Improved soil moisture, especially over their non or hard-wetting sand, better germination and higher organic content are strong reasons they've adopted the



conservation farming approach.

"We're still on nine-inch spacings with tungsten no-till points and do go back into stubble where we can," Neville said.

"We've gone to auto steer and while we're not horrendously precise we are on sub-10 centimetres, and usually a lot lower than that. We haven't gone down the traffic farming path because soil compaction is not as big an issue here."

Livestock

While the tractor's hum is part of the music of farm life, the chorus across the family's two blocks includes the call of more than 1600 sheep.

Neville maintains a self-replacing Merino ewe flock to produce first-cross lambs. They graze lucerne and pastures grown predominantly in non-wetting sand.

"While sheep are more labour intensive, I just find with stock in the mix when you get lower (cropping) yields, they tend to give us a bit of consistency in our income," Neville said.

The bulk of the sheep are turned onto stubble paddocks over the drier months. The practice gets stock off pastures during summer and promotes pasture rejuvenation.

But Neville keeps a careful eye on all stocked paddocks – especially hill country with sandy soil – to limit any risk of erosion.

"You've just got to selectively graze a little bit and keep an eye on stubble loads on the sand," he said.

"If you put lupins on sand, the sheep camp on the hills and the soil will blow."

Neville has trialled stationary 'lick feeders' with great success in the past four months.



He said instead of having to feed out in paddocks two to three times a week, it's a simple job to fill up each feeder weekly. Neville plans to have a feeder for every mob next year.

While crops are sown into the farm's better ground, sandy paddocks are deemed more suitable for grazing.

"We get about 14.5 inches (370 mm) of rain a year but there's more rain down one end of the property, so I crop the better paddocks and do things like lucerne and pasture improvements in the pasture paddocks," Neville said.

Sandy lucerne country is worked before sowing, then it too gets re-sown back in with no-till machinery.

Since implementing the no-till system Neville said the farm's organic carbon and yields have improved, especially on sandier land.

"We're also growing lupins on sand and improving the soil structure and getting less root disease," he said.

The future

Neville is always on the hunt for new farming techniques.

"Don't be afraid to try something new," he advised.

"But as I've learnt a couple of times, if you do try something very new, don't do it on too large a scale. Don't aim for the biggest paddock on the place. Trial

it on a small one and see how it goes."

Neville encouraged farmers to try something new every year.

"It's only got to be small," he said.

"It could be changing fertiliser rates, using a different fertiliser or trialling zinc on your seed."

The Cooke Plains farmer is pleased he's not so tied to the tractor now. He's happy the days of working a paddock to death are gone. And he wants his soil health to continue improving on cropping and grazing land.

"If you take it from a garden point of view, you put compost or good soil in to break down in order to feed your garden," he said.

"No-till is basically the same thing on a larger scale.

"I think we're probably growing more grain now on less rain.

"And on the stock side of things, if you don't take care of your pastures then it shows in your stocking rates."

Find out more

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

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