

## A diverse mix in central Vic

*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:** Bridgewater

**Farming operation:** cropping and sheep

**Livestock:** 1000 Merino ewes and 1000 first-cross ewes

**Crops:** wheat, canola, barley, lupins, oats and peas

**Mean annual rainfall:**

**Soil type:** light loam flats, grey plains and red clay

**Third-generation Bridgewater farmer David Wilson doesn't want his soil to be as good as it was when he started working the land two decades ago. He wants it to be better. Much better.**

David is sure his no-till approach, teamed with careful grazing and pasture improvements, will ensure the soil is healthier and more productive when the fourth generation takes over.

"It all starts with the soil," he said.

"You've got to look after the soil, that's number one, and then everything else happens from there."

David lives on home block 'Buloke Park' in Bridgewater district, north-west of Bendigo in central Victoria.

He and dad Don farm three properties, about 1560 hectares (3850 acres) in total, and lease another 364ha (900 acres). The land ranges from light loamy flats to grey plains country and red clay soil.



The Wilsons have sown about 60 per cent to wheat, canola, barley, lupins, oats and peas this year and carry about 1000 head of merino ewes and a similar number of first-cross ewes on pastures.

"We crop our paddocks for four or five years, then sow them down to pasture – generally lucerne or a legume-based pasture to build up the soil with nitrogen," David said.

"You have to keep feeding your soil because it relies on what you put back into it, nutrient wise."

### The cropping system

The former Longerenong College student credits a field day at a cousin's property with opening his eyes to the benefits of no-till farming.

He saw the difference in soil structure

between direct-drilled and fallow paddocks and knew which one looked healthier. So did the worms.

"We started no-till in 1990," he said.

"We had a combine at the time. We slowly modified that and progressed from there.

"We've seen big benefits as time's gone by. The soil is healthier, much easier to work and the yields are miles ahead.

"We've also had more access to the paddocks in wet years, because rather than getting wet on the top and running into the neighbours it's now going into the soil."

The Wilsons have modified their RFM airseeder over the years, taking it from seven-inch spacings (180mm) up to 12 inch (300mm).



While their sowing system involves one pass with knife-edge points, they sometimes give lucerne paddocks a pass with a cultivator with narrow points for a fine till before sowing.

"I'm just about at the controlled traffic stage," David said.

"I've got auto steer on the sowing equipment and sprayer but not on the header yet. Our next step is marrying everything up with the right width."

## A mixed system

David reckons no-till farming helps limit his tractor hours. This gives him more time to manage the 2000-head of stock that help diversify their farming enterprise.

"We do quite well profitability-wise out of our sheep and it gives us diversification rather than having all our eggs in the one basket," he said.

David and Don work hard to lessen compaction and erosion damage by sheep to soil and constantly move mobs, especially in dry months, to protect their paddocks.

While David grazes sheep on stubble over summer, he takes care not to leave them on light country too long to prevent the soil 'blowing'.

Using stubbles carefully gives pastures a chance to get away too.

They use containment areas in paddocks with no ground cover; locking up stock when dry weather tightens its grip.

"That's only in really dry paddocks because we don't want to erode soils and lose topsoil," David said.

He also restricts sheep from paddocks prone to soil compaction in years of high rain when paddocks are wet.



## Grazing crops

While the Wilson's ewes get the benefits of grazing stubble paddocks at harvest end they also get green pickings when the crops emerge.

For the past eight years David's been grazing wheat and barley crops over winter in good seasons.

The sheep go in about six to eight weeks after crops emerge and are removed before the plants reach the Z31 growth stage (first node).

"It does depend on the paddock and the amount of feed," David said.

"And I don't leave them in any longer than August. I might put them on a paddock for a week or just a few days but I have had mobs on barley for five or six weeks."

David's found there's been little or no grain yield penalty from grazing crops.

He tends to sow some varieties a week or two earlier than usual, to give them a head start. Last year he didn't graze at all because the crops were fairly late.

"I've found grazing crops allows our pasture paddocks to get away," he said.

"It gets more feed up to the sheep but I don't do it if there's too much moisture because it can cause compaction."

## The future

David has inherited his dad's love of farming.

He's passionate about his occupation, his custodianship of the land and new approaches to agriculture.

"The only way we can survive as farmers is by always improving and being more efficient," he said.

"We can't just say 'that's not a bad yield'. We've got to think how we can improve that yield."

"We have to get better and better and it all begins with the soil."

## Find out more

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

**BCG**

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