

Mixing grazing and no-till

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.

Location: Apsley

Farming operation: cropping and sheep

Livestock: self-replacing Dohne merino flock, with terminal sires put over cast-for-age ewes

Crops: canola, wheat, barley, oats, Balansa clover and brassica summer crops

Soil type: flat sandy loams and sandy clays

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Michael Lange reckons farmers are always looking for new ways to improve the health of their land and their business.

So when he saw first-hand the success WA farmers were having with no-till farming almost a decade ago, he was keen to adopt the approach on his family's 1800-hectare property Carolside in the Wimmera's west.

"In farming, you can't sit still," Michael said.

"I'd worked in WA and a few other places and saw no-till farming and knew it worked.

"I liked the concept of press wheels getting seed placement in the soil more evenly than simply using harrows.

"It's all about keeping the stubble for carbon, nutrients and moisture retention."

Full-cut direct drilling with harrows and burning stubbles ceased at Carolside in



Apsley district in 2007.

Michael, brother Jimmy and dad Rob headed into the workshop and started 'tinkering' on their path towards the no-till method.

"We all like doing stuff in the workshop and modifying things," Michael said.

"So we modified our John Shearer combine, ordered some press wheels and bolted them on and adjusted our knife points from seven-inch (spacings) to 12 inch.

"I remember '07 and '08 were really good years. In '07 we were getting yields of six and half tonne to the hectare with oats. It was just the right season to start no-till."

Within two years the Langes were modifying again, this time with a new Horwood Bagshaw air seeder.

The Lange men, who had cropped about 400 hectares in previous years, not only changed their machinery in 2007. They changed the balance of their enterprise, tripling their hectares under



crop while still running 8500 head of sheep in the mixed farming district.

"We took over some grazing country, leased country next door to put stock on and cropped some of our better country," Michael said.

The cropping system

The Langes plant canola, wheat, barley, oats, Balansa clover and brassica summer crops on Carolside's relatively flat sandy loam and sandy clay soils using the soil conservation farming method.

Michael said there were benefits that came with their change in approach.

"We were growing better crops, no doubt about it, and they were looking healthier," he said.

"We were also investing more money in variable inputs like chemicals and fertilisers as well as in capital."

Livestock

The Lange family run their cropping enterprise in conjunction with livestock.

Their self-replacing Dohne merino flock, with terminal sires put over cast-for-age ewes, graze on Carolside and neighbouring leased land.

The sheep, including prime lambs, graze on stubbles after harvest and pasture paddocks such as land unsuitable for cropping.

The Langes kept a careful watch on their stubbles, moving sheep after a few weeks to avoid soil erosion during summer.

They found soil lost its structure in areas where sheep gathered including around troughs and under trees. The



problem was worse in sandier country.

"We started doing summer cropping, brassicas, but found the sheep were pretty bad for soil compaction when we put them on to graze," Michael said.

The farmers also rotate cropping paddocks to pasture after four or five years before starting the cycle again a few years later.

"We were running quite high stocking rates but because we were doing more acres of cropping we could rest our pastures quite a bit," Michael said.

"So we had a lot of stubble to graze over summer and that took the pressure off our pasture paddocks.

"The sheep were a lot healthier, we could go back to drenching once a year and our worm burden went right down too."

The farmers also used grain lick self-feeders in paddocks for the stock.

Managing a mixed system

According to Michael many farmers in the district have adopted no-till farming (to varying degrees) and are successfully mixing sheep with cropping.

However he said managing the weed

burden was an ongoing challenge.

"Obviously you want sheep to graze as long as they can before you spray your cropping paddocks out," he said.

"But if you have a late break and don't get enough feed in the pasture paddocks, then you have to supplementary feed them."

The future

Michael said at the end of the day, farming was about getting the mix of the agriculture right.

He said diversification with cropping and livestock worked at Carolside and different income streams spread the risk.

"I suppose it's all about the balance and then getting that balance right," he said.

"You have to look at what your farm grows best I suppose and our land grows livestock best."

Find out more

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

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