

# Tipping the scale towards success

*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:** Lucindale

**Farming operation:** cropping and sheep

**Livestock:** 2000 Merino ewes and around 7000 first-cross ewes

**Crops:** broad beans, wheat, pasture and hay

**Soil type:** black clay over limestone

Richard Kirkland believes farming is a balancing act and his scales are tipping toward success.

The former shearer, who farms about 2000 hectares in SA's South East, runs a sheep and no-till cropping enterprise with family including dad Don and also contract sprays and sows.

There's no down time, Richard laughs, but he loves the challenge.

And he says that their diverse enterprise in Furner-Conmurra district, between Millicent and Lucindale, spreads the income risk.

"We are pretty flexible here and the livestock side gives us options," Richard said.

## The cropping system

Richard started (no-till) cropping in the late '90s but insists there are benefits that come with having stock.

"If you have a wet winter and your crop yield goes down you can rely on your stock for income," he said.



"I run the contracting business as well, so that helps too."

The Kirklands commit about 800 hectares to broad beans and wheat each year and another 100 or so to pasture and hay.

They use a Flexi-Coil 820 air seeder, retrofitted with double discs under the hydraulic tyne assembly, and are pleased with the way it sows smoothly through stubble.

"We've used discs for a season and a half and we've had no issues with stones," Richard said.

"It's not picking up any rocks. On limestone country tyres tend to dig up rocks and then we spend all the time picking and rolling them but the discs ride right over the top and keep going."

Richard sowed equal acreage to wheat and broad beans in mid May this year (2013).

He rotates his beans and wheat crops regularly and uses the pick of his country, the deeper, better draining soils, to grow them.

The remaining country of predominantly black clay soils over limestone are for





pastures. The Kirklands also cut hay for silage.

## Grazing crops

The crops play a large part in the family's livestock operation too, with sheep used to graze emerging wheat paddocks and wheat and bean stubbles after harvest.

"We put sheep on the wheat about five weeks after sowing, a few weeks after the crop's emerged," Richard said.

"It does depend on what the feed situation is but the benefit we get from grazing outweighs any possible change in yield. We can run a lot more sheep by doing it and I think the harvest is about the same.

"We're not really worried about soil compaction issues with sheep. I've done it when paddocks are underwater and it's still made no difference and crops have recovered. The pasture country's no different next door and it's got stock on it."

Richard, who uses auto-steer when sowing, says they looked into adopting a controlled traffic approach and de-stocking cropping paddocks but couldn't justify it when sheep prices were good.

"We are better off running more stock," he said simply.

## Livestock

The Kirklands run about 2000 Merino ewes and around 7000 first-cross ewes.

A contract team works through about 13,000 head during shearing time and Richard's pleased he's no longer holding the hand piece.

"We put the ewes on wheat stubbles and green wheat," he said.



"They have lambs when they're on the wheat and the lambs are also on bean stubbles after harvest and put on huge amounts of weight really fast.

"Grazing stubbles means we can give our pasture country a spell."

Pasture paddocks consist of ryegrass, sub clovers and phalaris.

The no-till approach is used when pastures need replenishing. And if too much ryegrass seed in cropping paddocks is disturbed by sheep and germinates, the Kirklands put the land to pasture or hay for a few years.

"We're not scared to work up a paddock if we think it's necessary," Richard said.

"But there's a reduction in labour if you can go straight into the paddock, it just saves so much time and money."

They supplementary feed with grain and silage when needed and make their own loose trace element mix for sheep to lick.

## Managing a mixed system

The Kirkland crew says the mix of sheep and no-till crops works for them and they take care to make sure there is

always cover on the ground.

Sheep eat summer weeds in cropping paddocks so they don't have to spray and the stock also keep snails in check by trampling them underfoot. That means stubbles don't need to be burnt.

And no burning is good news, Richard thinks, for the paddocks' health and organic content.

"All you have to do is look at a veggie garden and that's what we try to do on a bigger scale," he said, adding that sheep enhance the process further.

Richard lives on the farm with wife Nikki and their two children. He's farmed the land for about 15 years and relishes the ever-changing work.

"You get to do different things every day," he said.

"It's the variety that I like."

## Find out more

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

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