

Keeping it **simple** on small but productive **mixed** farm

LAUREN CELENZA, WANTFA EXTENSION MANAGER

Third generation Kojonup farmer Andrew Marsh likes to keep things simple and although the Marsh's farm is a relatively small operation, they try to be as intensive as possible.

'Sometimes we feel like an orchard compared to some of the wheat farmers in WA, but we still do all the same management operations,' he said.

profile

Andrew and Susan Marsh
Wandoo Hills Farm,
Kojonup, Western Australia

Farming system

Rainfall: 520 mm

Area: 940 ha

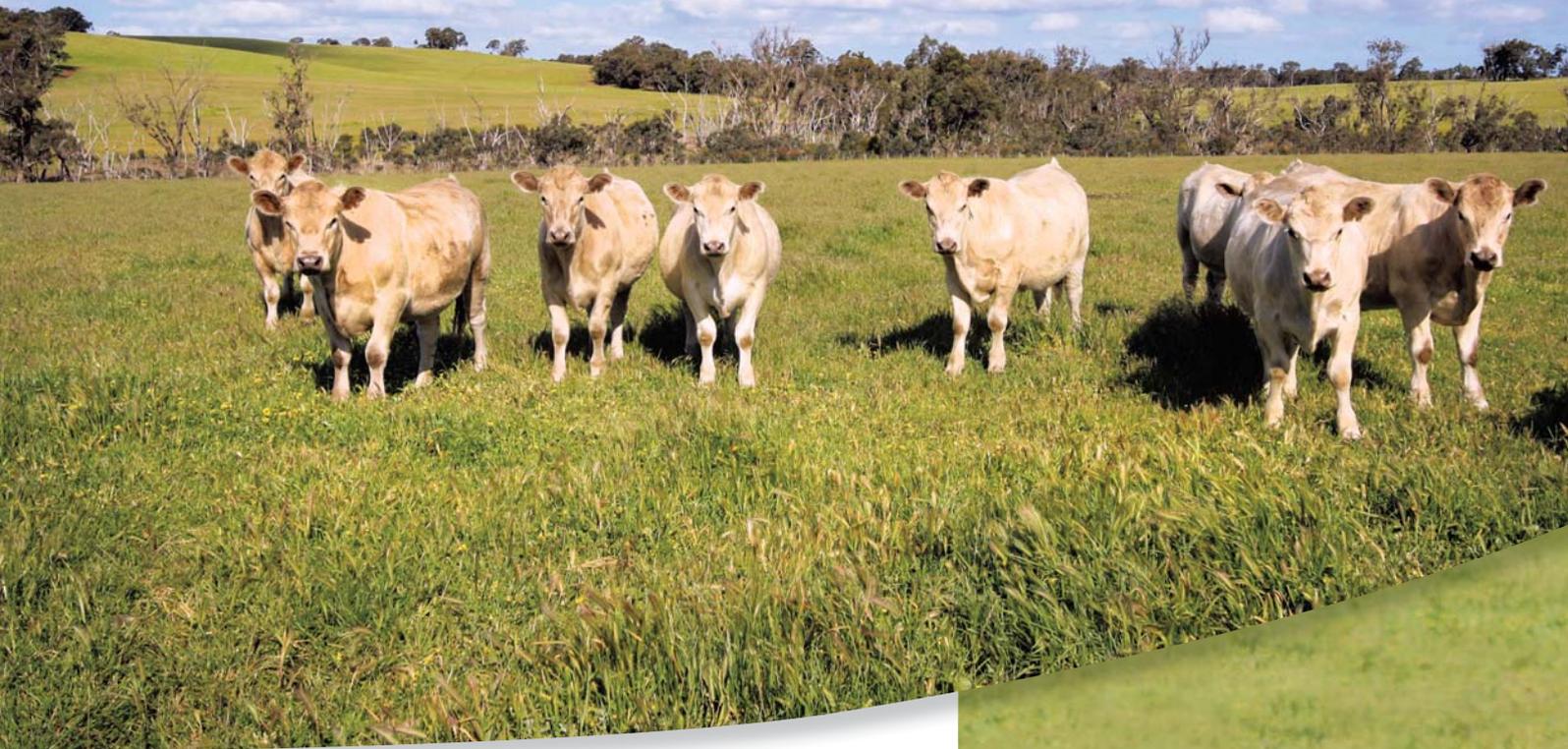
Enterprise mix: Merino sheep, Murray Grey cattle, wheat, barley, canola, oat crops

Soil type: Heavy red granite loams through to light jarrah gravel



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The livestock enterprises consist of a 600 head self-replacing merino ewe flock and 200 head of Murray Grey cattle.

Wheat, barley, canola and oats are planted on about 460 ha each year.

Weed management this year has been an issue for the Marsh's with large rainfall events hampering weed control efforts.

'The paddocks were clean, and then we had 220 mm of rain for August and September and now we are looking at ryegrass, speargrass and wild oats that have come through in the barley crop,' Andrew said.

Andrew also supplements the farm business with some off-farm income generated by contract swathing work.

'We run the farm as one whole operation and we try to keep it simple, the sheep and the cattle are run intensively and we try to do what we do well before attempting new things,' he said.

Sheep still a mainstay and cattle pay the bills

While crops were quite profitable, Susan said it was hard to justify increasing the area sown to cereals because it was such good land for livestock.

'We have a good mix of sheep, crops and cattle for our land's capabilities,' Susan said. Sheep are run pretty heavy on winter grazed hectares with 11 lambing ewes to the hectare.

'It's the same with cattle; we run a cow and calf unit per hectare and they are fed supplementary grain and hay.'

Andrew has been into cattle for the past seven years, since his uncle passed a mob of breeders on to him. At first Andrew thought he had no use for the herd, they were old and 'a bit rough'.

'I went through and picked out the best ones and sold the rest,' he said. 'We then started with 23 head of good breeding cattle and it has grown from there.'

The Marsh's like to keep their livestock enterprises simple with a young flock and herd. 'Our sheep are no more than five and a half years old and cattle are no more than sixth or seventh calf,' Andrew said.

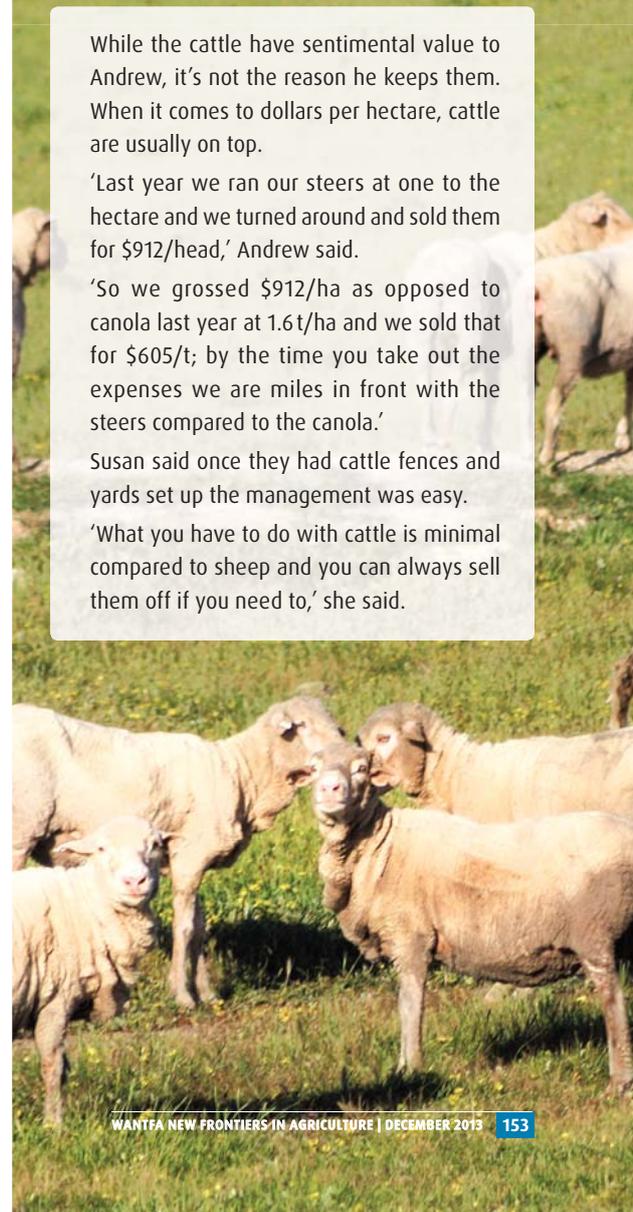
While the cattle have sentimental value to Andrew, it's not the reason he keeps them. When it comes to dollars per hectare, cattle are usually on top.

'Last year we ran our steers at one to the hectare and we turned around and sold them for \$912/head,' Andrew said.

'So we grossed \$912/ha as opposed to canola last year at 1.6t/ha and we sold that for \$605/t; by the time you take out the expenses we are miles in front with the steers compared to the canola.'

Susan said once they had cattle fences and yards set up the management was easy.

'What you have to do with cattle is minimal compared to sheep and you can always sell them off if you need to,' she said.





Changing with the seasons and varieties

Over the past decade, Kojonup's winter season has become less traditional and more 'all over the place' according to Andrew, which has meant more risky decisions have been made.

'Seasons have been fluctuating as much as grain prices over the past ten years,' he said. 'This year was dry up until July and now we have come off a really good July/August/September with 350mm of rain in those three months. Last year spring finished off quickly; the year before was extremely wet, and the year before that (2010) was extremely dry.'

Andrew likes to get a double knockdown on weeds and sow by calendar dates, preferably into moisture.

'We normally get a break by 10-12 May, which gives us ample time to get it all in when you've only got a small program. Surprisingly, last year the canola sown dry turned out to be one of the better crops,' he said.

Andrew likes to change canola varieties often to manage fungal disease blackleg.

'We run a pretty tight canola/wheat rotation and the barley is only in there as a break, so we need varieties with a good blackleg rating,' he said.

He usually only grows Mace and Calingiri wheat for their agronomic and market value.

'In a year like this, where there's a \$40 difference between noodle1 and APW 2, I wish I'd planted all Calingiri,' he said. 'Mace is good for weedy paddocks because it's a shorter season variety so we can put it in later and get a better weed kill and it holds up when we have wet harvests. We will stick with Calingiri until they bring out a better noodle variety.'

Pastures

Pastures on the farm are predominantly clover based, with some ryegrass, capeweed and barley grass. Some of the pastures have been there for several years, are self-sown and regeminate every year.

'The cattle probably don't manipulate the weeds as well as the sheep,' he said.

They also harvest their own clover with clover machines.

'We have a few good paddocks in which we can roll the clover. The good thing about that is that we can sow at higher rates (17kg/ha) of clover, with 50kg of Swan oats, and by the time we put the cropping paddocks back into pasture they have enough ryegrass in them for feed anyway,' Andrew said.

We have done some herbicide resistance testing and we found there was resistance to hoegrass and a few older chemicals but, in terms of glyphosate, atrazine and Select®, there was nothing of concern. The good thing about this area is we can always go back to livestock if weeds are a problem.'

Cropping not so easy in high rainfall

Andrew said their biggest problem with increasing the amount of land cropped was waterlogging.

'It's a big issue with the rainfall that we get and type of country we have got,' he said. 'A lot of granite base country is more productive to grow livestock on, rather than crops. There are a couple of paddocks that need full renovation to get rid of rocks and trees but they still wouldn't be any more than 60 per cent arable so we might as well stick with sheep on those.'

Some of the Marsh's paddocks this year have high weed burdens due to the high rainfall.

Being a small farm, they couldn't justify spending money on big equipment needed for broadacre cropping, so they share machinery with their family.

'My father has the seeding equipment and boomspray, I own the header, and we share a tractor,' Andrew said.

The seeder is a Morris Concept 2000, 30 foot bar, with a full knife-point and double shoot system.

Their soils are predominantly heavy red granite loams through to light jarrah gravel with some small pockets of jarrah sands. Since putting drains in, they have had less water erosion. However, in a wet year, they have seen tracks wash out and erode. That's why they practice full stubble retention as much as possible, but when they have too much stubble it can cause issue with herbicide efficacy, causing weed burden issues.

'We only burn if we have to, depending on the year. Two years ago we had to burn the wheat stubbles because we wouldn't have been able to seed through them they were that thick,' Andrew said.

