

Crops paying off in sheep country

LAUREN CELENZA, WANTFA EXTENSION MANAGER

Getting into cropping has the Webb family having to improve their soils as they endeavour to keep improving yields.

This is traditionally sheep country, but better drainage and more suitable crop varieties have led to a shift into more crop plantings over the past decade. Fourth generation Kojonup farmer Ben Webb is among many growers in the area who have transitioned into growing more cereals and canola and is reaping the benefits of a mixed farming enterprise.

With half the farm in crop and the other half for sheep, Ben is always improving both aspects with improved crop varieties and input management as well as sheep genetic improvement and pasture management.

profile

Ben and Emily Webb
Marbarrup Farm,
Kojonup, Western Australia

Farming system

Annual average rainfall: 535 mm

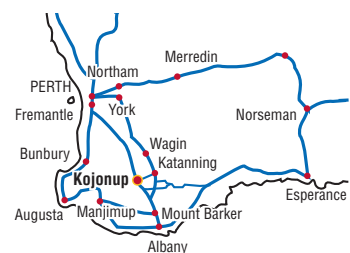
Area: 3500 hectares (50% crop, 50% sheep)

Cropped this year: 1100 hectares

Livestock: 8000-12,000 head

Merinotech (WA) ram breeding enterprise with self-replacing ewe flock

Soil: Predominantly duplex gravel loam with some non-wetting soils



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Crops suitable for soils and stubble

The main crops Ben grows are canola and barley, with oats, lupins and silage grown for sheep feed. Wheat was grown for a while, however, after benchmarking assessment uncovered that it wasn't performing as well as the barley recently, Ben decided to replace it with more barley, which performed better on their gravelly soils.

'As well as the economic value of the wheat falling behind barley, the ewes didn't respond as well to the wheat stubbles either,' Ben said.

Of the canola, half are hybrid and half are triazine tolerant (TT) varieties.

'We continuously change canola varieties and seed companies due to blackleg pressure,' Ben said.

Since 2007 Ben has been re-fencing the farm according to soil types and waterlogging pressures. They now have some continuous cropping paddocks, some permanent pasture and some areas phase farmed.

'Some paddocks that are good for cropping are continuously cropped with lupins as a legume every now and again,' he said. 'Good clover paddocks might be cropped for two years so the clover cover comes back by itself and you get two cheap crops.'

'In the wet paddocks we might just grow oats one year in every five to eight years, and in the wet or weedy spots we make ryegrass silage for the sheep.'

Weed management

Weeds on the farm include ryegrass, speargrass, and radish. To manage these Ben uses an integrated approach whenever possible.

'We try and get a double knockdown when we can. If there is an early break before seeding we can use good rates of Roundup® and other chemicals as spikes,' he said.

'I use full herbicide rates in crop, spray top the lupins, burn some canola windrows, use high seeding rates and vigorous varieties.'

'Barley is good for weed management as it competes well early on. If we have a blow-out we just cull out that paddock and put it to sheep for a few years or make silage.'

'We are keeping on top of the wild radish by spraying and pulling out late germinating and surviving plants by hand, and we don't buy in lupins as we have had some issues before with weed seed contamination.'

Diseases hinder potential

Root disease is one of the major limiting factors for their high yielding crops, according to Ben.

Some years in the canola and barley rotations he has had problems with the fungal and root diseases such as blackleg, spot-type net blotch, rhizoctonia and nematodes.

'That's where one of our next big leaps in productivity will come from, when we successfully control the diseases,' he said.

'Where we have seen spot-type net blotch, we are trying to use resistant varieties and good rotations.'

Ben said planting a crop after poor pastures riddled with silver grass risked carrying disease through to the next crop.

'Having lupins in the rotation and good pasture manipulation are helping with reducing disease carry over,' he said.'

Machines and inputs

Ben uses a Delisle disc seeder after changing from knife-points in 2002 because of issues with thick stubbles, horsepower requirements and seeding depth. Ben thinks a combination of tillage, discs and knife-points is the way to go.

Every year about 10 per cent of the farm is tilled with a scarifier to smooth paddocks out, kill weeds and mix in trace elements and lime. They soil test most paddocks every two years and anything below pH 5 gets lime and the canola paddocks get gypsum to provide sulphur.

After finding a manganese deficiency regularly showing up in their cereals they have started adding it to their MAPS/SOP fertiliser blend and applying a foliar.

'We had to spray some paddocks twice with trace element because of the manganese issue,' Ben said.

'Our non-wetting gravel seems to be an issue at germination but after spring it's sometimes hard to tell any difference.'

'I would like to trial claying in small areas and wetting agents post-seeding to improve yields in those areas.'

Livestock and pastures

The Marbarrup sheep flock ranges from 8000-12,000 Merinos depending on time of the year.

They put the lambs on the lupin stubbles in summer then sell as 'shippers' in the autumn.

BELOW: Ben checks the leaves of a barley plant for any signs of disease.

INSET: Examining the size of the heads and grain development of his barley crop.



'We breed rams for Merinotech (WA) and sell about 280 a year,' Ben said.

The ram breeding flock is run under commercial conditions; they are not given any special treatment so when the rams leave the farm they still perform under commercial conditions.

'We use a combination of subjective and objective measurements including post-weaning weight, eye muscle, back fat, faecal worm egg count, fleece weight, micron, yield, staple strength and visual traits like dags, plain faces and bare breach and fertility.'

They have 1250 breeding ewes in the ram breeding flock and about 4200 ewes in the self-replacing flock.

Rams are sold all over WA but are mostly sold to farmers around Boyup Brook and Kojonup. Semen is collected from the highest ranked rams and sold all over Australia and New Zealand.

Surplus ewes are sold as breeding ewes to prime lamb producers and half the ram-breeding ewe hoggets are kept in the ram-breeding flock by Ben to continue the ram-breeding program.

Pastures are sub-clover and ryegrass based. Capeweed, silver grass and insect pests are manipulated out where possible through heavy grazing and chemicals.

Stocking rates on the farm are usually 13.3DSE but this year it's been around 14.5DSE because of the good season.

'We use perennials for vitamin E for the lambs along with opportunistic summer crops like forage sorghum,' Ben said.

Wethers are put on lupin stubbles to fatten over the summer. They are shorn in April then around 92 percent

are sold as shippers while the smaller ones are run through the winter and sold the following year.

The flock is predominantly ewes with April shearing and August lambing. The entire flock is jetted and crutched with any that get flyblown being culled. After pregnancy scanning they separate the stock into mobs of 'dries', 'singles' and 'twins' with dries then culled and the twins run in smaller mob sizes in the better paddocks.

Lambing success is about 92 per cent lambs to ewes mated. Surplus ewes are sold, either as young ewes to other farms or as mutton if older. Wool from the flock is usually 19 micron for the mature ewes.

Keeping the mix

Ben plans to keep his farm around 50-60% cropped.

'I'm happy with how it's going; we'll just keep trying to improve the average yields.'

While management of root diseases has helped, Ben said further research into the issue would be useful.

He also would like to see more, higher rainfall, long-season barley and canola varieties bred specifically for the area.

'We also need a good lupin variety; everyone loves them for sheep and soil benefits but they are fickle to grow here. The varieties we have do not seem to be suited to the high rainfall zone,' he said.

'A vigorous, larger canola crop would suit me too. The Wheatbelt varieties look good early on but they stop flowering too early.'

BELOW: Ben and his son with lambs from the ram breeding flock.

