

Islander farming on the edge

KATHERINE MAITLAND

Kangaroo Island farmer Will Stanton has overcome many challenges farming off the mainland.

Broadacre cropping on Kangaroo Island has its challenges for Will Stanton, but new marketing avenues, cropping trials and a more integrated approach to agriculture is enabling him to run a successful farming operation.

Will, with his wife Jenny, parents Richard and Kate, brother Michael and sister-in-law Sarah, runs a mixed farming operation on the north coast of Kangaroo Island. They own 2,000 ha and lease 180 ha of land on five main blocks, most of which are at Stokes Bay.

Approximately 1,800 ha of their 2,180 ha is arable, with the balance native vegetation and waterways. The landscape is mostly undulating, with some flatter areas.

Will identifies soil acidity, freight, support for machinery and services as the biggest issues he faces with farming on Kangaroo Island.

No-till farming practices have certainly helped over time, particularly with soil structure and biological activity.

“My family have been farming on Kangaroo Island since the 1940s,” he said. “It’s a wonderful place to farm for the most part, as we have a supportive, tight-knit community and beautiful scenery.”

“However, machinery support, wet winters and freight and logistics make cropping challenging. The flat areas can be good in a dry year, but in a wet season they can become really wet, resulting in waterlogged soils.

“Our soils range from loam over clay to gutless white sand over buckshot ironstone and almost everything in between, sometimes all in one paddock. The rainfall is also very variable, with 450 mm falling at the coast and up to more than 650 mm further inland,” he said.



WILL STANTON CHECKS PASTURE GROWTH ON HIS KANGAROO ISLAND PROPERTY. THE STABLE CLIMATE AND GOOD RAINFALL ON THE ISLAND MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO GROW HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE PASTURES AND GOOD CROPS, BUT SOIL CONDITIONS AND FREIGHT CAN PRESENT CHALLENGES.

“Soil acidity is a problem across most of the Island. We manage the acidic soils through regular liming and would definitely like to look into variable-rate lime applications.

“Our mostly shallow soil types and relatively high rainfall makes management difficult, especially application of in-crop nitrogen. We found we often couldn’t get onto paddocks for weeks on end because they were too wet, so by the time we could spread granular nitrogen crops were often suffering badly or had been yield limited.

“In recent years we have changed to putting on multiple applications of low rates of UAN and trace elements whenever the paddocks are trafficable or from the air, with aerial applications making up about a third of our program most years,” he said.

“We apply UAN at no more than 30 L/ha several times before stem elongation and include zinc, copper, manganese and molybdenum in every spray pass.”

With only one ferry between the island and the mainland, freight is a challenge for farmers and other business operators on Kangaroo Island.

“One of our biggest issues is freight, which accounts for 10 to 15% of our expenses,” Will said. “A reliable, albeit expensive, ferry service runs at least four times a day, increasing to hourly runs during busy periods. All of our commodities come and go on this service. Our current freight rates are \$37.50 per metre. This equates to approximately \$50 per tonne when back loaded. There is currently no government assistance with freight.”

Machinery support is also a challenge for farmers on Kangaroo Island.



CANOLA IS AN IMPORTANT CROP FOR STOKES BAY FARMER WILL STANTON, WITH WINDROWING THE FIRST STEP IN THE HARVEST PROCESS.

“Machinery is an ongoing trial, mainly due to our difficult conditions, lack of experience and lack of mainland dealer support. Some dealerships are very good but the vast majority are happy to sell machinery to the Island, with little or no support offered afterwards.

“We use Seddon Motors at Parndana for parts and do most of our own repairs and maintenance.”

The challenges of farming on Kangaroo Island have not prevented Will and others from developing their businesses and things are improving, with changing management and new markets.

“We grow a wide variety of crops and pastures. Our main crops this year are canola (hybrids and the TT varieties Thumper and Crusher), wheat (Lincoln, Scout and Gazelle biscuit wheat), oats (Mitika and Outback), lupins (Jenabillup) and broad beans (Kareema). We also grow some peas, barley and linseed. Our pastures are predominantly sub clover based with a mix of perennial and annual grasses and more recently kikuyu.

“Broad beans are becoming quite popular

and are well suited to the Island due to their water logging tolerance. Difficulties with seeding equipment and the need for multiple fungicide applications are balanced by premium markets and the benefits of a legume in the rotation.

“Our unique soil types and high rainfall mean that mainland National Variety Trial (NVT) data are of limited value to us on the Island. Consequently, we realise we have a lot to learn and feel that trialling different varieties and crops is an important way forward.”

Through field observation and his own trial work, Will has been able to determine what crops work best on Kangaroo Island.

“We map yield data and collate this information with results from regular soil testing to improve decision making about crop types and varieties. In 2012 the yield maps showed an obvious relationship between elevation, water logging and yield loss.

“We have learnt a lot from looking at the paddock and accessing what we should grow the following year, and have worked with Agriculture Kangaroo Island (AgKI)

FARM SNAPSHOT

Farmers:

Will Stanton, wife Jenny, parents Richard and Kate, brother Michael and sister-in-law Sarah

History:

Will's grandparents cleared the land shortly after WWII

Land:

2,180 ha in five main blocks near Stokes Bay

Rainfall:

450 mm at the coast and up to more than 650 mm inland

Crops:

Canola, wheat, oats, lupins, broad beans, plus peas, barley and linseed some years

Negatives:

Soil acidity and shallow soils

Positives:

Good moisture levels and stable mild climate

to conduct GRDC-funded trials on areas on the Island; some of which have been on our property. This research is on-going and the data changes year by year.”

Will and his family have been no-till farming since the early '90s and zero-till farming with a disc seeder for the past five years.

“No-till farming practices have certainly helped over time, particularly with soil structure and biological activity,” he said. “We don't burn any more, but we do graze stubbles lightly in the summer.

“We generally sow as early as possible and try to have all seed in the ground by the end of May. Dry sowing is not necessary and we try to avoid it where possible.

“Our rotation is canola on legume on wheat, with the wheat sown at 130 kg/ha and canola at two to 4 kg/ha, depending on the variety. Row spacing is either 190 mm or 380 mm, depending on the crop.

“All paddocks are chosen on a ‘best fit’ basis each year and we generally finish harvest by the middle of January.”

Machinery has an important role in the family's farming practices, and earlier this year they bought a new John Deere 1890

single-disc seeder through Seddon Motors in Parndana. The new disc works well in wet conditions, Will said, unless the soil is so wet the machine begins to bog.

They also have a new sprayer; a Brandt SB4000 with a 6,000 L tank, 30-metre boom and high-flotation tyres.

The challenges we face during the cold wet winter months are balanced by a long cool spring and the stable island climate.

“We have trialled many types of sprayers and used a different unit in each of the past four years. Over the years we have tried everything from linkage sprayers on tracks to small self-propelled ones and the trailed machine on high-flotation tyres we have now, which seems to be working well.

“Our other machinery is mostly John Deere equipment because their parts service is fantastic. As long as it is ordered

by 4.00 pm we will see a part out of Melbourne by lunch the next day.”

The high rainfall means slugs and snails are significant pests and Will monitors crops and pest numbers regularly and uses bait where necessary.

“Our main pest issues are slugs and small conical snails in canola. We bait very heavily for slugs in canola, and in wheat when necessary,” he said.

Weeds are also a concern.

“We have issues with ryegrass and water weeds such as toad rush and loosestrife, which are a side effect of prolonged water logging in soils. Our main weed control strategy at the moment is a combination of pre and post-emergence chemicals.”

Marketing and selling grain has become much easier in recent times, thanks to Kangaroo Island Pure Grain (KIPG), a new collaborative group headed by South Australian businessman Duncan McGillivray.

KIPG, which provides an avenue for Kangaroo Island farmers to store, promote and sell their grain, was started by a group of farmers after the Australian Barley Board (ABB) left the island about

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four years ago, Will said. The group has a receival point near Kingscote, on the eastern end of the island.

“KIPG has been instrumental in the survival of cropping on Kangaroo Island. They have opened up new markets, particularly for broad beans, and reaffirmed old ones for our ever-reliable canola.

“Unless we keep grain for our own stock feed, 100% of our grain is sold through KIPG.

“Our biggest export is canola, with 100% being sent to Japan as a guaranteed non-GMO product. They also appreciate the traceability of our system and the close relationship with growers. Broad beans are now being exported to the Middle East and Asia through KIPG.

“As much as possible, grain is sent to an end market that will offer a premium. Storage and handling fees and marketing fees are somewhat high at up to \$50 a tonne, making our total cost up to \$100 a tonne to sell grain. However this is hopefully rewarded by premiums.”

The Stanton’s livestock program is an integral part of their farming operation.

“Having an integrated approach to agriculture is important when farming on Kangaroo Island,” Will said.

“We run up to approximately 8,000 Merino sheep, which are an important part of the overall operation and mean we are not putting all our eggs in one basket. They also mean we have something on the go throughout the year.

“The sheep enterprise, which my brother manages, is kept somewhat separate from the cropping program but there is a chance to value-add grain grown on farm and provide another revenue stream.”

According to Will, Kangaroo Island’s stable climate and the establishment of KIPG mean farming on the Island has a positive future.

“The challenges we face during the cold wet winter months are balanced by a long cool spring and the stable island climate. The area sown to crops on Kangaroo Island has increased in recent years thanks to KIPG’s involvement and I believe cropping on the Island has a strong future.

“Farming for us in the future will rely heavily on trialling new things. We are very interested in setting up some irrigation looking into cover cropping and a return to summer crops.”



SPRAYING IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF CROP MANAGEMENT FOR THE STANTONS, WHO HAVE TRIALLED A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT SPRAY UNITS, FROM A SELF-PROPELLED SPRAYER (TOP) TO THEIR CURRENT MACHINE, A TRAILED BRANDT SB4000 (MID AND BOTTOM) WITH A 30-METRE BOOM FITTED WITH SHIELDED NOZZLES TO MAXIMISE CONTROL OF THE SPRAY PATTERN.