

## Sheep a vital part of the business

LAUREN CELENZA\*

A balance of new and old techniques, including a combination of sheep and cropping, are paying dividends for WA farmer John Steel.

John, a second-generation farmer who has a 50% cereal and 50% livestock mix, believes having wheat and sheep working together in an integrated farming system is integral to his farm business, with weed control and sheep feed a major drawcard of the combination.

“We focus on good legume pastures with clovers and medics and the sheep do a good job on all the weeds, even the radish,” he said.

His paddock rotation on the 7,000 ha property at Yilgarn, in WA’s eastern wheat belt, about 350 kilometres east of Perth, is generally two to three years of pasture followed by a short cropping phase: either one year of cereal or cereal-lupins-cereal before the paddock goes back into pasture.

He aims for an average grain yield of 1.6 t/ha, but says they are continuously increasing that average each year.

“Twenty years ago we used to grow around 0.8 t/ha without the use of today’s nitrogen fertiliser. Our best average was 2 t/ha.”

John believes farming is going well, despite the crisis in confidence. “Prices are low, costs are high, and the banks aren’t confident at all, but just focus on what you know. Farmers don’t gamble: we manage risk to make a profit.”



SHEEP, AND THE LEGUME PASTURES THEY GRAZE ON, ARE IMPORTANT PARTS OF WA FARMER JOHN STEEL’S FARMING SYSTEM. “FARMERS DON’T GAMBLE: WE MANAGE RISK TO MAKE A PROFIT.”

### Viability

John has been able to stay viable even in the bad years by keeping things simple and not over-capitalising, with lots of small things making a big difference to their profitability over the years. By not spending money on new machinery but instead rebuilding and adapting his machinery himself, he has made money most years, he said.

### The vaccinations last year made a huge difference to the amount of arthritis in the flock.

Even in the past few years he has still been profitable.

“I have rebuilt my old seeder five times. Last year, however, we did buy a grain truck with two trailers for \$400,000, influencing the positive bottom line.”

The family’s 6,000 sheep include the Carribber Poll Merino stud, and the fall in sheep prices in late 2012 and earlier this year has hit them hard. “I had been trying to hold on to them to get a better price, but \$50/head looks like the best they can do right now, so we will get one

more wool clip off them and sell them,” John said.

### Sheep

Feeding the stock had been easy this year with summer rainfall keeping the pastures green, John said, but by March the Steels were feeding their stock with a mixture of hay and grain for added nutrition and to top up feed stocks after a plague of grasshoppers wreaked havoc on the pastures.

Having a legume-based pasture means John can graze weeds heavily because the sheep prefer the radish and capeweed, which they graze hard before they get down to the clover.

At the moment John has about 18 mobs of sheep, which are segregated on the basis of their sires. “There has been no market for rams. Usually we would cull them but this year we kept the lot.”

It has been difficult to sell rams since the introduction of the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS), he said.

He makes extensive use of A.I. in his sheep breeding program, buying in semen from sires Australia-wide that he selects on the basis of sire evaluation records.

“We are focused on selecting for fine to medium wool and can choose any Poll

### FARM SNAPSHOT

Farmers:	John and Robyn Steel; Richard and Willa Steel
Rainfall:	300 mm average
Soil:	Mostly sand, sand over clay and heavy red clays
Area:	7,000 ha total
Enterprises:	2,000 ha of crop a year; 6,000-head self-replacing Poll Merino flock
Crops:	Wheat, lupins, oats and hay



JOHN STEEL WITH THE KNIFE-POINT SEEDER HE HAS RE-BUILT FIVE TIMES. KEEPING THINGS SIMPLE AND NOT OVER-CAPITALISING MEANS HE HAS MADE MONEY MOST YEARS.

Merino from Australia if the genetics are good. They are all tested thoroughly so you know what lambs you are going to get.

“We compare the genetics from the selected sires against our own sires to make sure we are on the right track and ours compare reasonably well to the rest

**John believes burning stubble and weeds is a waste of a resource.**

of Australia. We put a ram in the National evaluation scheme once and he ranked better than average.”

At lamb marking, John vaccinates all his lambs with a six-in-one vaccine plus Aryvac to protect them against *Erysipelothrix* arthritis and the ewes are vaccinated with Aryvac prior to lambing.

“The vaccinations last year made a huge difference to the amount of arthritis in the flock,” John said. “I will be trying Tri-Solfen on the lambs this year, which is an anaesthetic for the lamb-marking wounds.”



AT SHEARING TIME IT'S ALL HANDS ON DECK FOR THE STEEL FAMILY ON THEIR YILGARN PROPERTY, WHERE SHEEP COMPRISE 50% OF A CLOSELY INTEGRATED FARM BUSINESS.

Carribber Stud's lambs are weaned, drenched and vaccinated again at shearing time, in August, which John said saves double-handling the sheep.

### Crops and hay

The Steels crop around 2,000 ha each year, growing wheat, lupins, oats and hay. The hay cutting, raking and bailing

machinery, and a shed that can hold 1,000 tonnes of baled hay, is a form of frost-proofing for John. "If the crop gets frosted I will just turn it into hay," he said.

Their seeder is an old 15-metre wide machine with knife-points at 200 mm spacings. Paddocks to be cropped will sometimes be worked before seeding to kill any bugs and stimulate weed growth so they get a good knockdown ahead of seeding.

"It depends completely on the season. Sometimes we direct drill and dry seed; sometimes we work it up," John said. "Dry seeding is part of a flexible farming system. We have always done it.

However, he prefers to wait for a decent rainfall before seeding.

"Dry seeding depends on the season, but preferably we don't want to do it," he said. "I would only dry-sow the cleanest paddocks. If it didn't start raining by the 15th of May we would start dry seeding and just go slowly, stopping if rain didn't come soon after."

"We double-knock our weeds and try not to crop in dirty paddocks. We also try not to use too many expensive chemicals;

however we do use a pre-emergent.

"We do a lot of spray topping in October to December, which works, but we are seeing a bit of barley grass surviving. However, the sheep have been helping control that."

John believes burning stubble and weeds is a waste of a resource. "Why not turn a useless grass into a nutritious feed? Then the paddock is clean and you don't have to burn."

After quite a lot of summer rainfall (about 130 mm in December and January) John sprayed this year's crop paddocks twice to control summer weeds; the most he has ever summer sprayed.

Wheat varieties used on the farm are Stiletto, Mace and Cobra.

"Stiletto has been good. We have been using it for a while, but we will slowly decrease it and use Mace instead as it doesn't yield as much as Mace and Cobra."

At seeding he puts 100 kg/ha of Agras fertiliser and 40 kg/ha of wheat seed down the tube. He tops up with urea if the season permits.

"We are set up for liquid spraying, but

I prefer to spread urea because I go as fast as I would spraying, but with spraying I get corrosion. Liquid works quicker but urea is cheaper."

*\* Lauren Celenza is WANTFA Extension Manager. This article was originally published in the June edition of the WANTFA journal 'New Frontiers'*



WEEDS CAN PROVIDE SHEEP FEED AND GRAZING HELPS WITH WEED CONTROL, BUT SUMMER WEEDS REMAIN AN ISSUE AND JOHN SPRAYED HIS PADDOCKS TWICE LAST SUMMER.

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