

Vigilance, planning, paying off for seasoned farmer

KATHERINE MAITLAND

Seasoned farmer Kevin Simon has combined minimal-till, vigilant agricultural practices and forward planning in his overall farm management strategy.

With almost 33 years in the farming game, Kevin has seen many changes in farming methods and systems.

Cropping approximately 1,800 ha at Halbury and Salter Springs, he takes a strategic approach that involves diligent monitoring of crops, minimal tillage staying on top of weed or pest issues.

“I started farming when I was 16, then took over from my father in 1988,” Kevin said. “We now own 650 ha, and the rest we farm on a contract lease. Currently, we grow wheat (Mace and Livingston), beans (Fiesta and Nura), canola (hybrid) and a small percentage of Fleet barley.

“We have tried lentils in the past but have not been particularly successful. We used to grow peas but stopped growing them due to an increase in snail activity. Now, with the machinery we have, wheat back on wheat is a good option. Prices also play a part in what we grow today. We don’t follow any set rotation. It really depends on wheat prices.”

Kevin manages two significantly different soil types, which influences his farming practices and what crops he grows each year.

“The Halbury property has sandy over loam soil types, whereas the Salter Springs property consists of black and red soil. Currently we crop Mace and Livingston wheat varieties on both properties. We have also tried Cobra, but were not overly happy with the screenings percentage.

“We really have to manage the soils to the best of our ability and ensure we look after the nutrients and soil biology. This has been part of our move to minimal-till farming.

“Soil health is extremely important, for now and the future. We have noticed over the years that because we keep stubble and residue in the paddocks, we have the capacity to hold more water in the soils.

“We seem to get pretty good germination on the heavy ground, but with the sandy ground we’re still working out the sowing

FARM SNAPSHOT

Farmers	Kevin and Christine Simon, son Luke and daughter Alex
History	GA Simon & Sons bought the land at Halbury and Salter Springs in 1956. Kevin’s parents, Alan and Beryl Simon, took over the property in 1970
Area	Halbury 360 ha, Salter Springs 1,800 ha
Crops in 2013	wheat (Mace, Livingston), canola (hybrid), beans (Fiesta and Nura), barley (Fleet)
Crops in 2014	wheat (Mace, Livingston), canola (hybrid), and beans (Fiesta and Nura).

depth and what gives the best conditions for the seed to germinate. We went a little bit deeper this year, but I think next year we will try and go even deeper still to get a bit better seed-soil contact. This season has been the best year we have had for canola germination.

“We have also noticed that our sandy soils are not getting as cold as they used to because with reduced tillage they are more compact and not getting the air in, which allowed them to get cold,” he said.

The reduction in tillage and move to stubble retention has also almost eliminated sand drift that used to be a problem on the Halbury farm.

Moving to minimal-till farming has helped Kevin reduce production costs and increase overall productivity in the past four years.

“We were conventional farmers for many years. We would slash, disc, use the prickle chain, sow the crop, use a prickle chain again and so on. However, faced with rising costs and marginal results, we decided to change to minimal-till farming practices. That was four years ago. We still need to slash each year, to handle the stubble residue, but the overall picture is a lot healthier,” he said.

As part of the move to minimal-till they bought a second-hand JD 1890 single-disc seeder.

“We were seeding canola and beans with our current seeder at the time, and it was getting a bit dry. I purchased a machine mid-season from Esperance in WA and

finished the rest of the sowing program of wheat, barley and peas with the new seeder. We were rapt with how it went then, and haven’t gone back since!

“We rarely have to burn or slash at all anymore. It has really changed the way we farm. You don’t have to do anything with stubbles, and there’s a lot less work.”

More recently, Kevin has upgraded to a newer, wider version of the JD 1890 that is powered by a 360 horsepower 9300 John Deere tractor.

“On the first machine the press wheels and bearings required a higher level of maintenance. On the newer machine the bearings are a lot more protected,” Kevin said. However, the JD 1890 is still a high-maintenance machine that needs regular servicing and check-ups, he said.

However, the benefits far outweigh the negatives overall.

“You have to be prepared to do a bit of work on the machine every year but it’s worth the extra time. It’s an easy machine to operate and we have been able to sow in almost all conditions.

“We would definitely recommend the disc seeder to other farmers wanting to make the change to no-till farming.

“The new machine is able to deliver better seed-soil contact as the 40 mm wide press wheels are right behind the disc opener. We have also noticed a more even germination and better crop establishment,” he said.

“We changed over to the 12 m bar this



KEVIN SIMON WITH THE DUAL-WHEELED, 360 HORSEPOWER 9300 JOHN DEERE TRACTOR THAT POWERS HIS SINGLE-DISC SEEDER.

year because we increased our area of farming land. We wanted to cover more country in less time.”

The extra width means Kevin has had to reduce his ground speed a little compared to previous years, but he still sows beans at an average of 12 km/h and wheat at 14 km/h.

Since changing to minimal-till farming practices Kevin has noticed changes in his weed populations and that retaining stubble has created a habitat for pests such as snails and mice.

“You have to be more vigilant with weed control when using minimal-till farming practices. In particular, summer weeds such as volunteer cereals have been an issue in the past three years.

“But you can manage this by preserving moisture and trying to get on top of the weeds before they get away.”

Other Mid North farmers have been using disc seeders for many years, Kevin said, and in the years since he bought his seeder, many more have changed to discs.

“A lot of people say that when it gets wet, disc seeders don’t work, but if you’re not

working the ground up it doesn’t take long to get back on it after it rains. A tine machine might get back into a paddock a day, or two days earlier after rain, but normally a disc machine can start seeding again a day or two after a major rain event.

“We are lucky with our sandy soils at Halbury. If conditions look likely to be wet during seeding we will sow our Salter Springs property first, and we know we can always come back to our sandy country and finish at home.

“Most of the beans are sown dry. We started the second week of April this year. If it hadn’t rained in May we would have kept sowing the canola dry as well. That’s the beauty of a disc seeder, they will get into harder soils and not bring up clods, and still be OK,” he said.

Kevin sows wheat on 190 mm row spacing, and canola and beans on 380 mm row spacing. “We sow beans on the wider spacing to allow more air flow through the rows and avoid build-up of diseases. Beans in wider rows also seem to branch out a bit more.

“With canola the 380 mm row spacing is

a catch-22 situation because the canola branches out more but there is a risk the canopy will not fill the inter-row and cover the ryegrass. Nevertheless, it seems to work. We have been able to drop our canola seeding rates from five to 3.5 kg/ha and our agronomist seems to think we can still go lower than that.

“We grow hybrid canola, which at the moment is about \$25/kg, so the more we can reduce the amount of seed we use while still getting the targeted plants per square metre, the better,” he said.

“All the beans are rolled post-emergence and this year we have also rolled the wheat-on-wheat paddocks to see if this has any impact on tillering.

“In one paddock we rolled half and left the other half as it was, to see if there is any difference in tillering. We found that Mace stubble was not easy to roll because the stalks were a bit tough.”

Kevin uses a mix of fertilisers including urea, UAN, MAP and DAP.

“This year the cereals received 100 kg/ha of AgStar 15 (an AgFert DAP product containing zinc and sulphate of ammonia).

We applied MAP at 80 kg/ha on the beans and the canola received 100 kg/ha of DAP at seeding. We also spread 150 kg/ha of sulphate ammonia pre seeding in the canola paddocks," he said. "We have been using UAN, but this year we went back to 100 to 150 kg/ha of urea."

"UAN is easier to get into the plant, even after a rain or if it's windy, and it is a lot easier to work with, but the cost of UAN compared with urea is too great, so we have gone back to using urea," he said.

"This is the first year we have used AgStar 15. Last year we had a few paddocks where wheel tracks showed up a bit yellow and our agronomist suggested we put 50 kg/ha of sulphate of ammonia on the tracks. Within a week, the yellow had disappeared. That made us think we should see whether using sulphate of ammonia in our fertiliser mix makes any difference."

Most of the crops, apart from the beans, have been treated with Flutriafol fungicide, applied in furrow.

Since changing to minimal-till Kevin has become more aware of the risk of weeds developing resistance to herbicides and pays close attention to what he sprays and how much.

"We try to reduce the risk of resistance by changing the chemical groups so we are not using the same sprays every season," he said.

"The combination will vary year on, year off, depending on the effectiveness of each spray and the season."

His weed control options include a pre-seeding double-knock of glyphosate and Spray.Seed, which he used in 2012 mainly to control pressing ryegrass issues.

"In addition to ryegrass we have volunteer

cereals and the odd marshmallow."

Snails have emerged as an issue for Kevin this year, particularly in wheat paddocks.

"We have had to increase the baiting program for snails this year. Snails don't seem to be attracted to bean stubble, so we try and use beans as a break crop to control snails by sowing beans in paddocks with heavy loads of cereal stubble," he said.

We went a little bit deeper this year, but I think next year we will try and go even deeper still to get a bit better seed-soil contact.

Throughout the growing season, Kevin juggles managing the Salter Springs block and the Halbury home property. During harvest, this becomes even more challenging, though the harvest-time pressure has been eased a little by construction of a new shed on the home property. The shed has concrete floors and walls, measures 21 x 22 x 7.6 metres and can hold 600 to 700 tonnes of grain.

"The Salter Springs block is six kilometres from our main property, so we have the option of carting grain home for storage or deliver it to the silo," Kevin said.

On-farm storage is not a long-term option but being able to hold grain on the property certainly helps when we get busy.

"If we did get into a situation where we had to store grain that had sprouted, for example, we would change our scope to see if we could keep it on farm.

"Currently, we don't treat the grain that goes into the storage, we just make sure the shed is completely clean before it goes in. But, as the grain is only there for two or three weeks, we don't have too many hygiene problems."

Forward planning is also a big part of Kevin's approach to his farming.

"Each year, we plan with our agronomist what we are going to grow, based on percentages and results from the previous years. If we have a bad wheat paddock, we will change the variety or crop on that paddock for the next year," he said.

With his family, he has also developed a succession plan that, over the next 10 years, will see his 21-year-old son Luke, who is currently working alongside him on the farm, take over management of the enterprise.

"Luke is the third generation Simon on this property. The practices that we are employing now, such as minimal-till, will be of great benefit for when Luke takes over," he said.

Kevin sees keeping up with the trends, particularly with new varieties and farm technology, as the key to the future.

"There is a future in farming. The key is to be aware of the new lines of seed coming out and keep on top of the yield mapping and guidance programs. We have tried to keep our machinery and technology up-to-date to keep ahead.

"Perhaps the next step in agriculture could be water jet seeding, or GM crops, but I'm still on the fence about both these subjects.

"Buying or leasing more land and growing more crops will also keep our business sustainable into the future."

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