When the time is right

SARAH JOHNSON

Good timing is critical to the success of a farming business, influencing a range of operations from seeding and fertiliser application to windrowing canola. Yet taking action at the optimum time isn't the whole story. Being prepared and responding quickly to change enables farmers to stay ahead of the game.

Farmers running profitable businesses tend to possess high-level organisational and time management skills, according to ORM principal Phil O'Callaghan.

While there are many variables affecting the success of a farm, management efficiency is a characteristic of all the profitable farm enterprises on ORM's database, Mr O'Callaghan said.

"It may not be something they're very conscious of and often good managers do it by default. They're well prepared and have everything ready to go when the time is right."

ORM, an agricultural consulting firm based in Bendigo, Victoria, was founded more than two decades ago.

Mr O'Callaghan identified six characteristics that impact timely farm management: paying attention to detail, setting priorities, avoiding distractions, matching resources to a farm's capabilities, delegating and knowing when to expand or consolidate.

"These are all factors we see in better managers," he said, "and time management is a key part of all those. For example, if you're not thinking clearly and you're not focusing on the priorities, then time management becomes less effective.

"One of the excuses we often hear in time management discussions is that things change. The grower might start with a plan for the day, but finds a tree limb across the fence so things change. As a result they don't think there's much point in planning.

ORM PRINCIPAL PHIL O'CALLAGHAN.

"It's about understanding what the priorities are: asking yourself whether this is essential, a must-do activity, or something that can be put on hold and come back to. It's about understanding the relationship between important and urgent."

Setting priorities

Mr O'Callaghan believes it is critical for farmers to have a plan and a clear vision for their business and that prioritising is a product of good planning.

"Setting tasks and prioritising those tasks is important," he said. "It comes back to having a plan. An annual, monthly and weekly plan is what I recommend. Managers need to understand what their big picture is then chunk it down to what they have to do this month and this week to make sure they're ready to go, so the timing is right."

WA farmer Rob Egerton-Warburton uses a decision-making matrix to help prioritise tasks in his mixed farm enterprise. He mentally categorises tasks into four squares: what needs to happen now and is important, what needs to happen now and is not important, what can happen later and is important, what can happen later and is not important. "Essentially every activity on the farm is sorted into one of those squares," he said. "The tasks that fall into the 'what needs to happen now and it's important' square are dealt with immediately.

"We're prepared to drop anything that we're doing to attend to an urgent task. It doesn't matter what we're doing at the time; if we're in the middle of shearing and we have an inch of rain, then I would say, 'right we're not shearing any more, now we're seeding'.

"If we don't have the manpower to handle both, then one activity stops while we do the other one or I get a contractor in. We

AIDS TO BETTER MANAGEMENT

WA farmer Rob Egerton-Warburton believes these five points can help farmers improve time management and organisation.

1. THE CROP RULES

Prioritise spraying, seeding and fertiliser application. Be prepared to drop everything to ensure they happen on time.

2. CHECK PADDOCKS RELIGIOUSLY

Visit all of your crops every week, to check for disease, pests and spray damage and keep in close contact with your agronomist.

3. STOCK UP

Farming is a volatile business. Stock extra seed and chemicals to allow quick responses to change.

4. TRUST WEATHER DATA

We're privileged to have access to good weather data. It's a valuable tool to assist decision-making.

5. MAKE A DECISION

The most important thing you can do is actually make a decision. Procrastination probably costs farmers more money than a poor decision.

RURAL DIRECTIONS AGRONOMIST PATRICK REDDEN.

do the important things on time, when they need to be done and everything else has to stop, including weekends and holidays.

"It's the same with weed control. You can't go fishing when a crop needs to be sprayed, because in two weeks' time it will be too late. You can cost yourself so much money if everything is not done on time."

A new Labour Management Fact sheet developed by the GRDC includes a time management matrix similar to the one Rob describes. The sheet is available at ***http://www.grdc.com.au/Media-Centre/Media-News/2013/05/Time-to-get-efficient.***

Rob works on the principle that every year is different. "There's no prescription; I don't have a calendar where every year I do things on the same date," he said. "You can use experience as a guide, but every year is a fresh start and affected by things like your financial situation and the weather outlook."

He stocks up on seed, fertiliser and chemical supplies to allow swift responses to change. "We always have 30% more seed than we require," he said. "I can decide what cereal will be planted on the day we start planting. I know we'll grow roughly a third of wheat, canola and barley, but if we get a good rain just before seeding I might change that to 50% canola." He also stores chemicals on-farm, but doesn't use everything he stores. "A third of the chemicals will probably go back and be swapped for something else, because the season is likely to change." Approximately 10% more fertiliser than he expects to need for the planned program is stockpiled to accommodate any cropping changes.

"Volatility is the norm, not the exception in farming," said Rob. "And it has become more extreme, as seen in the grain market and with fertiliser prices. The swings are huge, which means your decision-making has to be just as reactive."

Crop monitoring

Rural Directions agronomist Patrick Redden believes regular crop monitoring is important in keeping abreast of change in a cropping enterprise.

"I think the more effective farmers know exactly how each paddock is ticking along," he said. "People laugh at them because they're out there 'talking' to their crops, but it allows them to be in front of issues. Monitoring ensures they don't get a nasty surprise when they go to spray a paddock and find a disease or pest that they didn't realise was there.

"I'd like to see people thoroughly monitoring their crops at least once every seven to 10 days. It's about seeing crop monitoring as a stand-alone task, rather than as an add-on to spraying or as a drive-by. People with sheep wouldn't go more than a few days without checking their stock."

Rob Egerton-Warburton spends half a day each week checking his crops. "There wouldn't be a single crop on my farm that I wouldn't check at least once a week. I religiously look at every crop every week and pick up any problems.

"I always know in my mind what stage the crops are at and if I find a problem I don't recognise, I'll either take a photo and send it to my agronomist or get him to come out and have a look.

"If you want to maximise your yield, you've got to be right onto it."

Time of sowing

When to sow is a time-honoured debate amongst growers, which has intensified since the emergence of dry sowing.

Farmers commonly ask 'How early is too early to sow?', but Patrick Redden argues that 'How late is too late?' as a more pertinent query.

"Many farmers believe they'll lose significant yield by going too early, but I think it's better to get started early, rather than running the risk of a delay holding you up so you run late, when you can actually lose more yield."

In a trial conducted at Navan in 2011 by the Mid North High Rainfall Zone (MNHRZ) group, in which wheat was sown on April 21, May 5, May 19 and June 3 (TOS 1 to 4), the yield from crops sown at TOS 1 was more than 1 t/ha lower than from TOS 2, but higher than TOS 4, which was six weeks later.

Agrilink consultant Jeff Braun presented these results at a MNHRZ trial presentation day at Riverton early in 2012, as reported in the Stock Journal on April 26, 2012: "Sowing on May 5 and May 19 resulted in an equal result – 5.3 tonnes/ha," Mr Braun said. "Seeding on April 21 produced slightly lower yields at 4.7 t/ha, but sowing on June 2 lowered yields further, to 4.3 t/ha."

Clare-based agronomist Peter Hooper said many farmers now sow by the calendar, dry sowing as early as April 15. "There are more and more guys these days who work out when they want to finish and work back," he said.

"This was critical last year when the season didn't break until May 24. Farmers who dry-sowed had a distinct advantage over the farmers who waited for rain. Some who waited were sowing well into June and the crop didn't come up until the first week in July. Dry-sown crops came up three weeks earlier."

He argues that the 'right' seeding time in a particular season depends on the finishing rains and growing-season temperatures, with a kind finish ensuring later-sown crops do well. "There's nothing to say that later-sown crops won't do better, but on average, earlier-sown crops are more reliable in drier years."

Fertiliser

The timing of fertiliser application is also critical, with adequate nitrogen levels needed to achieve yield potential and optimise grain protein. Patrick Redden believes careful planning is required to ensure growers have the resources available when the rain comes.

"It's about not having too much fertiliser spreading or spraying to be done at once, so it could be worth considering applying a proportion of your nitrogen early to get it out of the way," he said.

"Last year farmers were hanging out for the next decent rainfall to top-dress nitrogen and either it didn't come or when it did rain, they didn't have the resources or time to apply the amount they wanted to.

"Another option is to look at your application method. Ask yourself: 'what's more efficient – spreading or spraying?' Or do you need a contractor to get it done?

"Farmers are starting to see that there are limited opportunities, so any chance they get, they need to drop everything else. They can't afford to miss a rainfall front, even if it's only July, because there might not be another rain event for another month."

Soil testing by Rural Directions showed that soil nitrate levels close to seeding time in the Mid North this year were as low as 50 kg N/ha, even after a pulse crop, whereas in recent seasons the levels have been 80 to 100 kg N/ha and even higher. "The low levels this year make the job of applying post-emergence fertiliser really important," said Patrick.

"In the past couple of years crop growth has been on the mark due to good starting levels of N. The crops have been fine until the middle or end of the year, which is when they've required extra."

According to Peter Hooper, the optimum time to apply nitrogen depends on starting levels and time of sowing. "In high-N situations early N may be detrimental, causing too much crop growth. On the other hand, in low-N situations early N would be best and delayed N could be detrimental. The general rule of thumb is that nitrogen application can be delayed longer with earlier times of sowing, such as early May, especially in high-N situations, while the opposite applies for later sowing times or low-N situations."

Trials in SA and Victoria between 2000 and 2010 showed yield losses can occur with delayed N in low-N or low-rainfall situations. "Basically, if a crop is struggling for N, it leaves it open to other pressures like soil or foliar disease and low dry matter production," said Peter.

On the Egerton-Warburton farm at Kojonup, in the south-west corner of WA, nitrogen leaching is an issue due to the high rainfall. "Depending on the year, we'll apply nitrogen up to four times, a little bit at a time," Rob said. "We tend to put very little nitrogen on up front with the crop. Every time we spray the crop – or go over it – we put a little bit more nitrogen on. If there are heavy rains, we return a week later with a nitrogen top up. We just keep tissue testing and putting on what the crop requires, rather than having a stab at the start of the season."

Rob finds tissue testing useful in extreme years, whether wet or dry. At other times he makes his fertiliser decisions based on crop stage. The rough guideline is 30% of urea in the early stages of crop growth and 70% at the reproductive stage.

AGRONOMIST PETER HOOPER CHECKING MOISTURE DEPTH IN A CEREAL TRIAL.

"We want to make sure all our money is being used to create yield and not disappearing down the creek line. You need to be ready to go and make sure that all the nutrients go on at exactly the right time."

Canola

Timing is also critical for canola swathing (windrowing), with research by the Grain Orana Alliance (GOA) in central-west NSW, showing yield increased as windrowing was delayed, although yield can be lost if windrowing is delaying too long.

The alliance conducted six trials over 2009, 2010 and 2011 to examine the impact of canola windrow timing on oil content, yield and profitability. Crops were cut at three different timings, based on colour change in the seeds in pods on the middle third of the main stem of the canola plants.

"Across the three seasons and a number of sites, windrow timing has shown to have a consistent and significant impact upon yields," wrote Maurie Street, GOA CEO in the trial paper. "Early windrowing at around five to 10% colour change has consistently resulted in lower yields than later windrow timings.

The results also showed there is a limit to how long windrowing can be delayed, because there is an increased risk of shattering and yield loss as the crop matures.

"Windrowing later than 50 to 60% colour change has not always resulted in further significant yield increases.

"As the crop passes through the physiologically mature stage and starts to dry down, the brittleness of the crop and pods increase. This increases the risk of shattering and hence yield loss while the crop is standing or during windrowing. The ideal windrowing stage should be a balance between maximising the grown yield and keeping this yield by minimising pre windrowing or windrowing losses."

Patrick Redden suggests contractor availability is a major factor in the timing of windrowing.

"Growers should take control of when their canola is swathed, ensuring it happens at the optimum time for yield rather than the best time for the contractor. They'll find they pick up a couple of per cent in yield and oil."