

Aiming for a 'simple and manageable' farming system

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SIMON BALLINGER WITH CHILDREN JARED (LEFT) AND NIKKI (RIGHT).

Keeping it simple and manageable is the key to Wolseley farmer, Simon Ballinger's success.

Working on his family farm since 1991, Simon has trialled and tested many varieties of broadacre crops, finally deciding on four main crops and a simple cropping regime to manage his 1,800 hectare property.

Simon previously grew barley, lentils, oats, wheat, canola, faba beans and durum as well as running approximately 250 breeding ewes. Now, he is concentrating on four crops - wheat (Mace and Derrimut), durum (Tjilkuri), canola (a range of Clearfield varieties) and faba beans.

Simon says the combination of these four crops helps the crop rotations each year and allows flexibility with time of sowing.

"We wanted to keep our cropping program simpler by concentrating on four main crops, rather than six or seven," he said. "It also seemed a logical and easier way to manage our cropping."

Simon's father John and his wife Marg have farmed the family property, about

20 kilometres south-west of Bordertown, since the 1960s. In 1991, Simon and his wife Ellie joined the Ballinger enterprise.

Since then they have expanded their land holdings, upgraded technology and improved the overall efficiency of the property. Simon says a lot has changed over the past 50 years, including implementation of a complete no-till farming system.

"In the 1990s we used to pre-drill our fertiliser and cultivate the land," Simon said. "In 1996 we had a really wet winter and the germination of the crops was ordinary and yields suffered. This changed our thinking about our practices and now we utilise a no-till farming system.

"Since making the change to no-till we have noticed we can get over the ground a lot quicker and can do more with the same amount of equipment," he said.

Other changes made over the years include fitting press wheels to maximise seed-soil contact and spreading urea post seeding.

"We sow DAP fertiliser then spread urea post seeding," Simon said. "We use

FARM SNAPSHOT

FARMERS: Simon and Ellie Ballinger, father John and wife Marg

HISTORY: property in the family since the 1960s

LOCATION: based at Wolseley with a small block over the border in Victoria

PROPERTY: 1,800 ha

CROPS:

previously wheat, durum, canola, faba beans, barley, lentils, oats, peas

2012 – wheat, durum, canola, faba beans

CHALLENGES: maintain control of ryegrass, impact of the cost/price squeeze

POSITIVES: strategic location, good soils, reasonable balance of crops and livestock

standard fertilisers to keep things logistically easier and use press wheels and knife points when sowing all crops.

"Our time of sowing has also changed over time. We have noticed that it helps to get the crop in early.

"In previous years it was not unusual to sow at the end of June but the yield penalties from that are too great. Now seeding generally starts around early May, with harvest in late November and December.

"When I first came home to work on the farm harvest often wasn't finished until long after Christmas and it was not unusual to not harvest any cereals before Christmas. Now most people are finished by Christmas.

"Times are changing and the climate is getting warmer so plants are finishing off earlier. By choosing shorter-season varieties and sticking to four main choices we can better manage the changing climate and our cropping regime."

There has also been a change in weed populations on the property.

“Wild oats used to be a problem, but with Clearfield canola, it’s not so bad. Ryegrass has taken over as our number one weed problem.”

Simon says the soil types on the Wolseley farm are generally ‘very reasonable’ and can produce good yields given reasonable conditions.

“We have sticky grey clays and red slopes with friable black clays,” he said. “The beauty of these soils is they can hold a lot of moisture when they get wet. However, in dry years such as the drought in 2006 we had nearly zero crop production.”

Growing crops in the South East can present challenges, but Simon says every year is different and it’s a matter of reacting to the conditions as they develop.

“Getting good seed-soil contact can be an issue in our heavy soils and adding the press wheels has improved our canola germination in particular.

“One of the biggest challenges is that we rely on rain to start our season because we don’t ever dry sow,” he said.

In the past few years they have had quite a few dry starts and Simon says he has taken risks, particularly with urea.

“I think it’s challenging and sometimes costly but you need to fertilise to the crops’ potential,” he said. “It’s about not being afraid to spread urea when things are looking a bit dicey. After the summer rains of 2010-11 we had a reasonable bit of subsoil moisture last year and ended up spreading quite a bit of urea, which was a really worthwhile exercise.

“One of my favourite sayings, which is printed on a poster on my wall, says ‘When the sky says go, will you be ready?’. This implies that you need to have everything ready to go when the weather calls. To me, this is pretty crucial,” Simon said.

The Ballingers’ farming practices are similar to those of their neighbours and many other farmers in the region.

“Most of our neighbours are also no-till farming and there are plenty of nearby properties employing simple practices similar to ours,” Simon said. “However, some growers in the region are still using more traditional methods.”

He believes a good balance is an important part of keeping things simple, yet effective.

The Ballingers run sheep but the livestock

operation comprises only a small amount of the total farming operation. For most of the year they have approximately 250-300 breeding ewes on the property on non-arable ground, but at certain times of the year, they will also buy in and fatten cross-bred lambs for market.

This periodic increase in stock numbers has a role in helping them control ryegrass and can provide a ‘reasonable income’. In most seasons the lambs being finished for market are run on brown-manured vetch, which means ryegrass in the vetch paddocks is sprayed then grazed, and finished on bean stubble.

“Our soils are not well suited for sheep during wet winters. When we have very wet winters our clay soils become very boggy, making it difficult to manage big numbers of livestock.”

“In the future we will need to retain more stubble and manage snails, which were a big problem last year,” Simon said.

“Snails are the Achilles’ heel of a complete stubble retention system and need to be controlled before the population explodes. Burning of stubble is undertaken if we feel numbers are getting too high.”

Simon says managing staff and machinery will also be a challenge for the near future.

“For the past 20 years or so it has been just dad and me working on the farm, with the addition of one other workman, who is now full time. As the older generation slows down and begins to retire in the next few years we need to look at how best to manage this major change in our business.

“The upgrading of machinery has helped

with our man-power issue. Auto-steer technology has to be one of the major increases in farming efficiency in the past 10 years. We have also bought a new header which has increased our overall efficiency.”

A few people in the Bordertown area are using disc machines; a development Simon is watching with interest.

Simon, a long-time member of SANTFA, rates the people he has met and the knowledge gained as a result of his membership as ‘invaluable’.

“I enjoy the conferences every year,” he said. “Meeting enthusiastic people in the same boat as you gives you the drive to keep doing better. There is always someone doing things better somewhere else and I appreciate the information I receive from SANTFA that maintains the enthusiasm for the game.

“I think it’s important to take an interest in what others are doing because it’s the best way to learn. Go to as many tours and conferences as possible to gain more knowledge.”

In the next 10 years Simon expects to take on more of his father’s role and responsibilities.

“There will be a change of management in our business but the practices will not change. However, I want to be able to identify opportunities and, if time and money permit, take advantage of them.

“I will continue running the sheep and cropping programs together to keep a good balance but want to keep things simple and easy for our family farm.”



SIMON BALLINGER WITH HIS AIR SEEDER.