

International, local scholars head speaker line up

Glencore Grain 15th Annual SANTFA Conference

SANTFA's 2013 annual conference will have a stronger focus on networking and the topics and speakers will be better than ever.

This year's event, the organisation's 15th annual conference, will be sponsored by Glencore Grain, who has taken over from Viterra as the major sponsor.

The conference will be held at the Barossa Arts & Convention Centre, Magnolia Road, Tanunda, on Friday, February 22.

To guarantee your choice of forum sessions and the chance to hear Canadian Nuffield scholar, farmer and agronomist Steve Larocque and some of Australia's best young farmers, contact the SANTFA office to reserve your place now.

Diversification, risk management, controlled traffic farming, mixed farming systems, grazing grain crops and cover cropping are all on the list of topics for this year's annual conference.

The program, which features three Nuffield scholars discussing how they are applying their findings to their enterprises, has been developed with a clear focus on sustainability and profitability; essentials for all farming enterprises.

Other farmer speakers will detail their experiences with direct injection sprayers, weed sensors, and the use of precision agriculture technology, clay, lime and gypsum to improve soil conditions and productivity.

Canadian farmer and consultant agronomist Steve Larocque heads the speaker line up.

Steve grows canola, wheat, barley and peas on more than 12,000 ha of heavy clay country near Three Hills, about 100 kms north-east of Calgary in Alberta.

He is also the principal of Beyond Agronomy, an independent crop advisory

service, publishes Beyond Agronomy News, a weekly crop production and grain market newsletter with his wife Vanessa, and is managing director of Preferred Carbon Land Management.

Steve used his 2007 Canadian Nuffield scholarship to study controlled traffic farming and on completion of his scholarship set about applying his findings on his property.

He was one of the first growers in Western Canada to implement a full controlled-traffic farming and inter-row seeding system and five years on he has also adopted no-till.

A first-generation grain farmer who has a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture and is a certified Crop Advisor, Steve cautions that, while there is a general belief that farming more land is the key to improved profitability, 'bigger is not better, better is better'.

"Continuing to farm with the same management practices over a larger land base simply adds more risk and not necessarily profit."

He believes controlled traffic farming offers the potential higher returns from less land with less risk, and is confident that successful Canadian farmers of the future will embrace controlled traffic to take production and profitability to a new level.

Steve, who converted his dual-wheel tractor to single wheels as part of his change to CT, says converting to a CTF system needn't be expensive, and growers shouldn't stress if they have to leave permanent wheel tracks occasionally.

He advocates that farmers begin to evaluate axle loads and the potential for wheel track compaction in their own farming systems and that researchers and farmers put aside assumptions and speculation about compaction and begin addressing the issue through research and on-farm experimentation.

Diversity and risk are key issues for Rob



CANADIAN FARMER AND CONSULTANT AGRONOMIST STEVE LAROCQUE.

Egerton Warburton, who farms at Kojunup, in the WA wheat belt about 200 kms inland from Margaret River.

Rob, a finalist in the 2012 farmer of the year competition, gained a Nuffield scholarship to study mixed farming systems and found himself exploring the relationship between diversity and risk.

He recognises that, regardless of the amount of research showing them 'a better way', farmers manage risk by doing what produces the most reliable result, whether this is growing GM corn in the same paddock for 25 years or adopting complex crop and pasture rotations.

However, he is confident that 'diversity decreases risk and increases opportunity' and sees integrated livestock cropping systems, which provide diversification and opportunities for risk management and a means of coping with a changing

environment, as an important part of Australian farming.

Rob is currently exploring the potential and practicalities of grazing grain crops; an approach he believes has significant potential to reduce risk.

"In a poor season, income generated from the livestock grazing the crops reduces the financial risk due to low yield as result of a poor finish. In a good season the mid-season return from the livestock increases the total income."

"Whether you choose to own the stock, agist or feed for weight gain, using the synergy between stock and crop has the potential to increase income and decrease loss."

He believes the next big leap in production will come from synergies between enterprises and exploiting the diversity of farming enterprises, rather than improvements in plant or animal breeding.

"Working more on the synergies between farms could give large production boosts as well as improving risk management and sustaining rural communities."

With a variable climate and little or no support from government, the farming sector needs to manage its risk better than it currently does, he says, and it is important that Australian agriculture takes a more balanced approach to its farm enterprises.

"Farmers have for too long relied on plant and livestock breeders and Research and Development Corporations to provide them with production growth."

"More focus needs to be placed on the interaction of enterprises within farm businesses and between farm businesses."

Craig Duffield, the third Nuffield speaker, is exploring the potential of diversified cover crops, which he is optimistic will provide economic and ecological benefits on his property outside Goyder's line near Ramco in the SA Mallee.

He was exposed to the principles behind the concept of species-diverse cover crops when he visited Dakota, where the North Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Service suggests soil health can be improved by minimising soil disturbance, increasing plant and animal diversity, maintaining living roots in the soil for as much of the year as possible and keeping the soil covered by vegetation at all times.

In one US trial the soil under a cover crop was 11°C cooler than in soil with no surface cover and Craig believes keeping the soil covered to reduce soil temperatures could prove to be a key benefit in the Mallee.

One unexpected result he has observed on his property is a reduction in brome grass numbers, probably due to the competition from the cover crop species.

Many Australian growers question the wisdom of cover crops on the basis that they use valuable moisture that might otherwise be available for grain production, but Craig points to North Dakota research that found only 1 mm difference in available water with and without a cover crop.

Craig's Nuffield studies suggest there is potential to improve the outlook for and sustainability of family farms in marginal areas, he says, but that will require farming systems that are economically viable and environmentally sustainable.

He also sees a need for farmers in marginal

areas to consider diversifying into other businesses or services or working collaboratively with other producers to improve our financial situations, which may require 'ingenious' methods to improve business performance.

However, he cautions, family farms will not survive through to the next generation no matter how viable they are without good communication and planning within the family unit.

With family farms, the farm business and the family itself are so intertwined that the succession process has a dramatic effect on all those concerned, with failure to plan a transition to the next generation a threat to even the most profitable and sustainable farm business.

Nathan Craig, a farmer and contract seeder based at Apsley, in South-Western Victoria who has recently relocated to WA to do a PhD in zero-till systems, will discuss his experiences with disc seeding systems and the potential for summer forage crops for SA farmers with livestock or looking to include livestock in their system.

Nathan, who sees distinct benefits from a combination of cropping and livestock, believes disc seeders can ease and accelerate the transition between cropping and pasture because they can provide good seed placement and germination in variable country, with the low soil disturbance maximising the availability of moisture for germinating crops.

The ability of a disc opener to seed through standing crop or surface trash also increases the opportunities to establish summer crops to provide extra feed for stock; even in paddocks that have already produced a winter grain crop. 

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