

## Future focus on continuous cropping and more land

KATHERINE MAITLAND

After running sheep for almost 45 years, the Moyle family has decided to concentrate on cropping as the primary focus for the future.

Mixed farming has many benefits, but the Moyle family has taken a strategic decision to get rid of their livestock and focus on broadacre cropping.

This decision, taken in August 2013, will enable them to move to continuous cropping and concentrate on improving their cropping program, which they have expanded in recent years with more land and new varieties of niche crops.

The family farm near Parilla, in the southern Mallee, where Brad Moyle, his wife Liz and parents Hayden and Bev, operate a 3,900 ha property that produces barley, wheat, lupins, canola and chickpeas.

For more than 45 years they have also run a self-replacing Merino flock, but with the livestock workload increasing they decided to shift their focus to what they see as a more practical farming regime for their business.

Brad, who follows his grandfather and father in running the property, says the focus of the farming program has changed in the past five years, with the purchase and lease of more land increasing the area under crop. With the increase in the area of crop and minimal staff, the family were torn between an intense livestock program filling the calendar and maintaining a productive cropping agenda.

“It’s just me and dad on the farm,” Brad said. “We don’t employ outside contractors or farm hands because we try to be as self-sufficient as we can be. We decided to cut back on the workload and focus our attention doing one thing well.

“We decided to sell the 1,200 breeding ewes in August last year while the prices were strong. We sat down and did the sums, and with the amount of work involved in running the livestock, we worked out we could make more money in cropping for the next five years.

“Leasing land for livestock required spending money on infrastructure that needed to be replaced, which neither our land owners nor our family were prepared



BRAD MOYLE AND HIS FAMILY (FROM TOP) ISABELLE, TIMOTHY, SAMUEL, RACHEL, WIFE LIZ, BRAD AND MATT.

to do. This was another reason to get out of sheep.

“We found that while we were concentrating on our sheep we should have been focusing on crops. We were missing opportunities in the paddocks, such as spraying and spreading, which was costing us in the end.”

The Moyles are continuing to expand their cropping program, with more land added last year.

“There was an opportunity to buy 445 hectares. We already lease a fair bit of country, so we thought it was time to buy something we can have total control over. It was also time for my wife Liz and me to have something for ourselves. We have five children so we need to consider the future.

“We have pressures in this region from the potato industry, which seems to be swallowing up quite a bit of land at will,



LUPINS ARE A USEFUL BREAK CROP IN THE MOYLES' CROPPING ROTATION.

making it harder for broadacre farmers to buy land, so we took the opportunity to buy our own land when we saw it.”

Leasing is still a big part of the Moyles' farming operation. Brad says there are benefits with leasing land as well as owning your own.

“Currently we lease half of what we farm, which means we don't have to pay so much per year for the land and there's no bank interest or council rates, or the other little things that are on top of owning land. Paying a percentage of the value of the asset is a cheaper way to expand your operation if you don't have the money to go and buy land.

“However, leasing land means we don't have complete control of it. We can't always do what we want to do and spend money where it's needed. Nine times out of 10 the landowners are not willing to spend money to improve the land, which can make it hard for the farmer,” he said.

Growing crops in the Mallee has positives and negatives, with issues such as frost and low rainfall a challenge year to year. However, with careful management and



SAMUEL MOYLE IS DWARFED BY THE NEW 17-METRE JOHN DEERE TRIPLE-TANK AIR-SEEDER.

minimal-till farming practices, the area is proving to be a lucrative cropping region.

Their crop rotation meant the Moyles sowed more barley (Maritime, Hindmarsh, and Commander) than wheat (Cobra, Mace, and Catalina) last year. They also grew Mandelup lupins, TT canola, Jaywick triticale and Striker and Slasher chickpeas.

“We try to have the same amount of barley and wheat each year,” Brad said. “Our rotation is generally two crops of wheat then a crop of barley, followed by a break crop of lupins, chickpeas or canola but does vary a bit depending on the soil in the paddock. In the sandier country we might grow two crops of barley then follow up with triticale.”

Brad and Hayden added Striker chickpeas, a variety bred for lower-rainfall regions, to the cropping program last year.

“We decided to grow this particular variety because we are trying to find a crop that will give us a nitrogen fix on our heavy soil where lupins don’t grow. We also wanted a crop that stands up for reaping and, of course, makes a little bit more of a profit. We have grown vetch in the past but the market for vetch is not big. We have also tried peas but they consistently didn’t yield for us.”

Brad says he is lucky to have a mix of soil types ranging from heavy clay to white sandy soils.

“We have a good mix of soils, with the majority being loamy country. The farm we just purchased is quite loamy, which means in a dry year it can still produce a decent amount of grain. With sandy soil we don’t get a lot of moisture or fertiliser restrictions, which means there is more moisture available to the plant.”

**“No-till practices have been an important part of changing the landscape of farming in South Australia and are going to be here for a long time.”**

“With the combination of no-till farming systems that retain more stubble and our lighter soils we can drought proof our farms to a certain extent.”

Average rainfall in the Parilla district is about 300 mm a year, but some good rain events in the past four years have resulted in above-average seasons, Brad said.

“The rainfall has been a bit all over the place in recent years. In 2012 we got lucky with a big rainfall event at the beginning of the season that set us up for the year. We had low rainfall overall, but grew an above-average crop. Last year we had only had a bit over 210 millimetres for the year but the crops performed very well.”



HAYDEN MOYLE WITH GRANDSON SAMUEL AND A TRUCK USED FOR GRAIN CARTING.

Frost is a major concern for Mallee cropping farmers, but time of sowing, stubble retention and plant health can help reduce the risk of damage, Brad said.

“Frost is an issue every year but there is not a lot we can do about it. Last year, frost hit the region in mid-October, so anyone that held back and sowed later were probably hit harder than others.

“Sometimes we can get hit in September, sometimes as late as October. We can only adjust sowing times a little to get around the frost risk.

“With undulating country the frost damage tends to be worse, with crops on flat, sandy loam country affected most years. Keeping the stubble on these soils helps minimise frost damage by retaining moisture the crop can obtain from the soil.”

No-till farming methods are an important part of the Moyles’ farming practices and have helped minimise erosion and improve moisture retention. There are also soil conservation benefits.

“No-till and minimal-till farming have helped our farming operations immensely. We have little to no wind erosion and don’t have to grade along fences or get the shovel out to level the drift build up under the fence,” he said.

A new RTK auto steer guidance system for the air-seeder has improved efficiency and enabled Brad to sow inter-row.

“Last season was the first time we used RTK auto steer on the air seeder. It enabled us to sow in between the rows, right up against the stubble from the previous year, to penetrate into the



A CROP OF STRIKER CHICKPEAS, A VARIETY BRED SPECIFICALLY FOR LOWER-RAINFALL REGIONS.

moisture zone. We find that if there is a rain event the stubble is able to capture the moisture and help distribute it through the root system. Sowing beside last year's stubble is more effective than sowing right in the middle of the row and is particularly useful in the sandy soils.

"We're also looking to put a steerable tow on our air-seeder bar to further improve the accuracy for this year."

Brad and Hayden apply trace elements such as zinc and copper to the soil ahead of seeding.

"One of our focuses now without sheep in the picture is to apply more trace elements to the soils, particularly zinc, copper and sulphur, pre seeding. Last season we applied zinc sulphate and copper sulphate through the boom spray and spread gypsum as a source of sulphur.

"We have also looked at delving. With our soil types delving or claying would be good, but the expense means it is not an appealing option. Claying and delving is popular in our region but there have been a few problems. People have been putting on too much clay and in dry seasons the soils tighten up and cut the moisture available to the crop."



QUITTING SHEEP HAS FREED UP TIME AND RESOURCES FOR ASPECTS OF CROP MANAGEMENT, INCLUDING WEED CONTROL.

In 2012, the family bought a 17-metre John Deere 1870 bar and triple-tank air-seeder.

"We were getting a bit frustrated with the old bar because the seed placement was not good, which was affecting germination. The new seeder has improved the overall efficiency of seeding and germination.

"The three-bin tank allows us to place urea down the chute during seeding, which we were not able to do with the previous seeder. We don't have to use any follow up application of nitrogen because it is all done at seeding, but if the season

is going well a follow up application can be applied," he said.

Weed issues overall have not increased in the Mallee in the past five years but new weeds, such as fleabane, have recently emerged in the region.

"In our area we only really need one application of herbicide during the cropping period in most years, but since 2012 we have had to increase spraying over summer to control summer weeds. Fleabane has come into the area in the past three years, with 2010 particularly bad for fleabane.

## FARM SNAPSHOT

Farmer:  
Brad Moyle

Family:  
Hayden and Bev Moyle, their son Brad and his wife Liz and their five children – Isabelle, Samuel, Rachel, Timothy, and Matthew

Holding:  
Approximately 3,900 ha that includes 2,300 ha of leased land

Rainfall:  
300 mm a year average

Crops:  
Barley (Maritime, Hindmarsh, and Commander), wheat (Cobra, Mace, and Catalina), lupins (Mandelup), canola (TT varieties), triticale (Jaywick), chickpeas (Striker and slasher)

Negatives:  
Low rainfall, risk of frost damage

Positives:  
Reliable country, mix of soil types



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“Our summer spray is generally a mix of 450 Roundup at a rate of 1L/ha, 2,4-D amine at 700 1L/ha, and Garlon at 100 mL/ha,” he said.

Brad’s wife Liz is responsible for grain marketing and keeping up with market trends. Keeping the marketing expertise in house means they are more in tune with what’s happening in the industry, Brad said.

“Liz is a great asset to the business. I could not do what I do without her. She is responsible for all the grain marketing and does a great job. In 2013, for example, we forward sold a lot of grain at a fixed price and held on to a bit. If you set the price and the market moves up, it’s a win win situation. We keep the plan fairly flexible. That way you can sell more or sell less depending on the price,” he said.

Brad and Liz both see being involved in industry grower groups as a means of keeping abreast of agricultural growth and changes. Liz is currently the chair of Partners In Grain (PING) in SA and Brad is the current South Australian No Till Farming Association (SANTFA) president. They value their experiences in these roles within the industry on a professional and personal level.

“One of the highlights for me of being part of the SANTFA board is the friendships you make across the State and the amount of knowledge you can get through other farmers’ experiences. Some of the people encountered will be lifelong friends, which is a big positive.

“Serving as SANTFA president has been a real eye opener for me and has put me in a team environment. It’s been a rewarding and invaluable experience.”

Brad sees a positive future for agriculture, and says now is an exciting time to be in the industry.

“For us personally, we can enjoy the benefits of no-till farming and not having sheep. We will hopefully improve our soil to a point where the next generation can take on the farm in a better position than what I did, if they wish to do so.

“Farming in general is in an exciting position at the moment. No one thing is the same in agriculture; there is always something new and different to try. No-till practices have been an important part of changing the landscape of farming in South Australia and are going to be here for a long time.”



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