

in the paddocks they renovated last year.

Holdfast is drought and grazing tolerant but Laurie cautions that it is vulnerable as a seedling.

“Phalaris has to be managed carefully with insect control and controlled grazing For the first 12 months,” he said. “This means grazing sheep for shorter amounts of time and at specific times to allow the phalaris to get well established and crown out. Once we get past the first year, we’re right.”

Laurie believes consistent seeding depth is

the key to successful germination.

“Sowing small seeds requires the seed to be sown at a consistent and very shallow depth,” he said. “We’ve been able to achieve that with the disc seeder because each disc follows the contour of the land.

“This is important with our undulating surfaces. We’ve got clay, crab-hole soils where there are lots of variation and undulation in small areas of the paddock. The disc seeder is able to sow every seed as consistently as I’ve ever seen.”

Keeping weeds under control is also aided by the disc seeder. “There’s not quite as much weed germination because of the minimal soil disturbance.

“Toad rush is one of the banes of sowing phalaris in this environment and soil disturbance is one of the things that stimulates toad rush.”

Laurie has also found that the lack of soil disturbance helps reduce the ryegrass population, which can be an issue when establishing small seeds. “The ryegrass does germinate, it’s just not as bad.” 

Wet conditions no problem for zero-till pasture

SARAH JOHNSON



SIMON ROBINSON, CHECKING ESTABLISHMENT OF A DISC-SEEDED CROP, HAS SEEN IMPROVEMENTS IN PASTURES AND CROPS AS A RESULT OF HIS CHANGE TO ZERO TILL.

A shift to zero-tillage has seen Victorian farmer Simon Robinson reap benefits across his cropping and grazing operations.

Simon changed to contract sowing in 2010, engaging Nathan Craig from Zero-till Farm Services to sow perennial pastures and cereal crops on his 950 ha property.

Using a contractor to do his seeding has allowed Simon to access superior seeding

technology without the cost of upgrading or replacing his full-disturbance tined seeder.

“I looked like having to upgrade our old machine, but given we’re only sowing 200 ha of crop a year, I couldn’t afford to spend a lot of money on it,” said Simon.

“I decided the only way I could get the best technology in the paddock at a

reasonable cost was to use a contractor.”

Based at Langkoop, 10 km south of Apsley in the West Wimmera region, he has also used Nathan, who runs an Excel single-disc seeder, to complete a pasture renovation program Simon’s father started in the 1970s. “You can get so much more production from improved pastures in this area, so we’ve renovated all our

pasture paddocks,” he said.

He now has 80% of the property under permanent pastures that support 1,650 Merino ewes, 1,100 Merino wethers and 1,250 first cross ewes plus a small commercial beef herd.

The renovation program was completed this year when the last pasture paddock sown to a mixture of phalaris plus trikkala and balansa clovers.

Renovation is a two-year process that begins with ripping and levelling the paddock and incorporating lime. The paddock is then sown with a cereal crop, either wheat or triticale, for two years.

The two-year cereal phase provides an opportunity to eliminate most of the weeds in the paddock. Onion grass is a problem in his district and Simon’s weed control program for the pre-pasture cropping phase includes an application of 20 grams a ha of Glean in each of the cropping years.

Simon has noticed that pastures sown with the disc seeder perform very well.

“We’ve had fantastic results with the small seed,” he said.

“I really like the no disturbance of the disc seeder, especially in the wetter country. It doesn’t get all mushy in winter and it allows you to get stock on sooner and drive on it earlier. It also has very good seed to soil contact.

“Last year we sowed a lot of our wet country, which is by a creek line, and we achieved a magnificent result with the phalaris and clovers. It just came up like a crop.

“Nathan can get in where I couldn’t with my tined implement because his seeder is wider and doesn’t disturb the soil.

“When we sowed with the 24-row conventional seeder we had to go around wet patches. With the disc seeder you can pull through the water. You might get a very small puddle in the middle that prevents establishment, but generally the perennial pasture germinates throughout the wet patch. It’s amazing what actually comes up in there.”

With permanent pastures now established on the wetter, low-lying regions of his property, Simon has set up his higher, better-drained land for continuous cropping, providing diversification in his enterprise mix. He had previously used a phase system in which he had cropped each paddock for two to three years then

returned it to long-term pasture. Now his best 200 ha of land are set aside for cropping.

His cropping program starts with canola followed by two cereal crops. This rotation is repeated and the paddock is then put under balansa clover for two years. In the first year the balansa stand is managed as a pasture. In the second year it is grazed through to late August then cut for hay as a weed control strategy. The paddock is then returned to the cropping rotation.

In order to build up the organic carbon in the soil, Simon no longer burns his crop stubbles, choosing to manage them with strategic grazing.

“The first priority is to get our perennial pastures under control. If there’s a huge residue at the end of spring we’ve got to get that bared down, although not completely. The rule of thumb is that you should be able to hit a golf ball out there and find it by April.

“After that, we graze the stubble; and there are great benefits in that. If we get a summer storm we don’t have to spray the weeds out, we just graze them.”

Grazing the stubble provides extra feed for stock and rests the permanent pastures. Simon also uses stubble grazing as part of his regime to manage worms in his sheep flock; running drenched sheep straight into stubble in a worm-free cropping paddock. This minimises the risk of re-infestation and maximises the efficacy of his worm control program.

“Once you’ve finished grazing your stubbles you can return the sheep to virtually worm-free pastures. It’s a great tool.”

Only two years into disc seeding, Simon believes the jury is

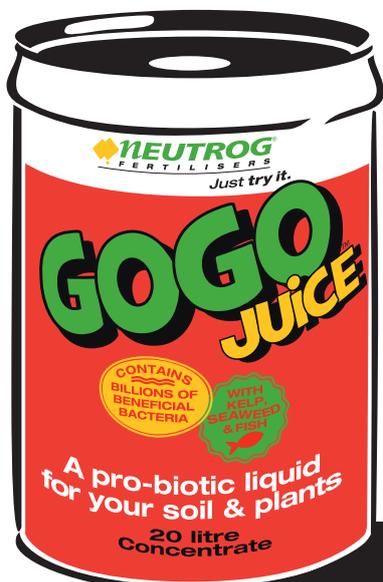
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still out on the long-term combined effect of grazing and zero disturbance of the soil. He foresees compaction as an issue but plans to incorporate lime and gypsum with a tined implement every 10 years. “It won’t involve deep ripping the soil. It’s a matter of stirring up the soil to incorporate the lime and gypsum.”

He is also considering following Nathan’s example and planting a crop of millet and sorghum to condition the soil.

“Instead of cutting the balansa for hay we could sow a crop of millet and sorghum in the last year of our rotation. It would provide summer feed and act as a good soil conditioner.”

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