

Seed placement like no other

SARAH JOHNSON



DISC SEEDING HAS IMPROVED PASTURE ESTABLISHMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY FOR APSLEY FARMER LAURIE CLOSE AND HIS FAMILY.

The road to zero-till began more than 30 years ago for the Close family, who farm near Apsley, in Victoria, just over the border from Naracoorte.

Fine-wool producer Laurie Close said his father started the ball rolling in the 1970s. "My father was a very innovative farmer and went into direct seeding of pastures at a very early stage of its development.

"Since then we've trialled a variety of different machines including modified combines, Baker Boot points and triple discs.

"We used no-till for quite some time, when it wasn't as sophisticated as it is now. For 10 to 15 years we sprayed out paddocks and went straight in with modified combines."

Five years ago the family moved to a zero-till system, contracting all of their seeding work to Nathan Craig from Zero-till Farm Services. Nathan uses an Excel single-disc seeder to sow approximately 200 ha of pasture a year on the Close's 2,200 ha property, which is located 10 km east of the SA border.

"I haven't seen a machine better at seed placement and soil contact than the machine Nathan is using at the moment," said Laurie.

"I've made a conscious decision not to pursue ownership of machinery. With a contractor I'm able to get the latest technology on the farm without significant capital investment."

Laurie believes pasture production has improved as a result of using the zero-till technology.

"The technology of seeding equipment has advanced quite considerably and we've seen our crops improve as a result," he said.

"Just from my own observations, our germination has improved dramatically.

"Our previous seeding machines and systems tended to result in patchy germinations. You'd look at a row and there'd be a metre where nothing had come up, then it would be lovely and then you'd go another metre and the pasture would be sparse.

"With the disc seeder, the uniformity of

germination is very good."

With 17,000 sheep and 500 head of cattle, the Close family's main focus is on renovating their pastures. "Soils and pasture are the basis of our business," said Laurie, who runs the farm in partnership with his wife Sue and sons Oliver and Xavier.

Their pastures suffered during the dry years in the late 2000s.

"We had a period of four or five years where we did very little pasture work, simply because we didn't have spare feed for our stock. We couldn't afford to put paddocks aside for renovation and invest in our future; we were just hanging on by the skin of our teeth," said Laurie. "The drought of 2006 had a big impact on a lot of our pastures."

With improved rainfall in recent years the family has taken the opportunity to reinvest in their pastures and target paddocks where species haven't persisted. Always on the look-out for improved species, they have found Holdfast GT phalaris works well in their farm environment and they sowed 3 kg/ha of this variety

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

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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