

Mallee farm family expands with a plan

MIKE ROBERTS

McPiggery is a closely integrated family farming business that has expanded significantly in recent years to maximise efficiency and accommodate changes in the family.

Today the business, run by the McMahon family, combines a 1,650-sow piggery with sheep production and cropping on 14,000ha of land spread over 75 kilometres. Almost all the grain they grow is used in the pig enterprise.

Initially the focus was on piggery development but in more recent years the family has aimed to increase their property holdings to provide better balance between the enterprises and allow more family members to be involved in the business.

As the piggery expanded there was a need for more grain to supply the pigs, son-in-law Sam Venning explained, and since 2007 McPiggery has bought 3,000ha of cropping ground. The business also recently acquired a 3,300ha grazing block south of Parilla.

The 300 to 325mm annual rainfall country they farm has soils ranging from white non-wetting sand through to very heavy ground.

Buying better-quality cropping ground means they do not have to crop marginal country and crop yields have improved as a result, Sam said.



THE PIGGERY THAT IS THE CENTRE-PIECE OF THE MCPIGGERY BUSINESS TURNS OFF ABOUT 700 BACON PIGS A WEEK AND USES MOST OF THE GRAIN GROWN ON THE PROPERTY.

The ultimate aim is to have three viable arms of the business that can each stand on their own.

“The aim is to grow all the grain to feed the pigs because we can grow it cheaper than we can buy it in. We have expanded cropping to keep up with demand from the pigs and the sheep enterprise has benefitted at the same time because buying better cropping land has meant we can allocate former cropping ground to the sheep, improving their productivity in the process.

“A lot of what used to be cropping ground has now been sown to permanent lucerne and veldt grass pastures for the sheep.

“The ultimate aim is to have three viable arms of the business that can each stand on their own. We can't rely on the cash flow from the pigs to prop up the sheep or the cropping enterprise.”

Labour is one thing McPiggery has plenty of, with 22 full-time employees plus three part timers and Peter, Jenny and Neville.

Piggery

The cropping and sheep are important enterprises but the main driver of the business is the piggery, which employs 13 full-time workers. There is a home breeder site for mating and farrowing and a separate grower facility to reduce disease risk.



MCPIGGERY CROPPING MANAGER SAM VENNING WITH HIS WIFE KATE AND THEIR CHILDREN MADISON, FIVE AND EVIE, TWO.

Grain storage has been increased to the extent that McPiggery can store sufficient grain to feed the pigs for 12 months.

Peter McMahon oversees the piggery but a manager who lives on site runs day-to-day operations. The enterprise turns off about 700 bacon pigs a week, with the animals trucked to Primo at Port Wakefield for slaughter to supply Coles supermarkets.

Sheep

Buying the grazing land near Parilla has enabled McPiggery to increase the sheep flock from 5,000 to 7,000 ewes. Half are mated to Merino rams from local studs with the other 50% mated to Suffolks and Border Leicesters for prime lamb production. Ewe lambs from the Border Leicester crosses are sold through the Naracoorte first cross sales. Duane has one person working with him on the sheep enterprise permanently and can call on others during busy times.

Cropping

Sam Venning started working on the McMahon property in 1997. They business switched to no-till in 1999, buying a Case Concord direct drill machine that did a lot of work over 10 years. However, the cropping team was never happy with its seed placement and Sam was instrumental in the purchase of an 18 metre Seed Hawk airseeder from Canada in 2009. McPiggery now sows 5,000ha of crop and 2,000ha of pasture a year with that machine, which Sam said gives consistently excellent seed placement.

“There is a front knife, which drops the fertiliser behind it, then a following knife point which sows the seed slightly off-centre into firm soil. Then the press wheel comes along giving good seed/soil contact. The fixed frame doesn’t lift but allows the tines, which are set to sow on 300mm spacing to, follow the contour of the ground. That is why the seed placement is about as good as we can get.”

A John Deere three-bin air seeder box separates the urea, the MAP and the seed and the rig is pulled by a John Deere 500hp tractor.

The abundance of labour on McPiggery means that at busy times employees can be assigned to fill gaps and meet peak demand.

“At seeding we have five or six people working in the cropping enterprise whereas normally we might have two or three. The airseeder works around the clock with two drivers.”

FROM MCMAHON TO MCPIGGERY

Peter and Jenny McMahon, with Peter’s brother Neville, started the farming business originally known as McMahon Brothers at Kulkami, half-way between Lameroo and Karoonda.

Over the years they have been joined in the business, now named McPiggery, by Peter and Jenny’s three daughters, Kate, Kim and Nicole and their partners, all of whom share a passion for the farm and have been involved in a period of recent expansion to make the business successful.

Kate’s husband Sam Venning, who now runs the McPiggery cropping program, had always wanted to be a farmer so had no hesitation leaving a career as a landscape gardener to begin working for the McMahons when an opportunity presented itself.

Nicole’s partner Duane Simon, formerly a shearer, manages the sheep enterprise and Kim’s husband Haydon Thorpe works on general farm duties. Kim has a degree in Rural Business Management from Marcus Oldham College and plays a major role in managing the formal business aspects, with Peter, Jenny and Neville still very much involved in overall management.



LUCERNE HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE ON MCPIGGERY, WITH LESS PRODUCTIVE CROPPING COUNTRY CONVERTED TO PERMANENT LUCERNE AND VELD T GRASS PASTURE.



LUPINS ARE ONE OF THREE LEGUME BREAK CROPS GROWN ON MCPIGGERY, WHICH HAS RECENTLY WIDENED ITS ROTATION TO IMPROVE WEED CONTROL AND RUN DOWN THE WEED SEED BANK.



MCPIGGERY HAS SUFFICIENT ON-FARM STORAGE TO HOLD 12 MONTHS' SUPPLY OF GRAIN FOR THE 1,650-SOW PIGGERY.

LISTEN AND LEARN

Seek out and talk to people who are really good at what they do and take advantage of opportunities to learn new things through progressive organisations like SANTFA, is Sam Venning's advice for growers looking to improve their crop management.

"I've only managed the McPiggery cropping program for five years and have two or three people in the community that I really respect and turn to for advice," he said.

"I went to my first SANTFA conference in 2009 and have gone back every year since then. I'm keen to become more involved with the organisation because I've learned so much."

In 2012 Peter and Sam also spent almost a month in the US and Canada on a study tour led by WA consultant Bill Crabtree, during which they 'met some good people and saw some amazing things'.

They sow 'by the calendar', beginning seeding on a date decided by working backwards from an ideal finishing date for the season. "My aim is to have all the sheep feed in no later than mid-April and concentrate on cropping from then onwards," Sam said. He no longer drives machinery as much as he used to but rather coordinates activities, answers questions and makes sure everyone knows what they are meant to be doing.

The main limiting factor for the seeding operation is the area that can be covered with the boomspray.

All spraying, whether pre-seeding or in crop later in the season, is done using a 36 metre self-propelled John Deere boomspray and a batching unit truck with a 5,000L tank. One person sprays and a second maintains the chemical supply so the sprayer doesn't have to leave the paddock.

Grain storage has been increased to the extent that McPiggery can store sufficient grain to feed the pigs for 12 months.

While this maximises the efficiency of the sprayer, it is still difficult to apply all the chemical needed at the right time.

"At seeding time we're busy putting out trifluralin in front of the airseeder so it's hard to get the sprayer to different properties kilometres apart to spray knockdowns," Sam said.

This issue is being addressed by addition of a second sprayer; a trailed unit that will take advantage of a tractor not currently used to capacity. The 36 metre Croplands Weedit will have a 7,100L twin tank and dual lines that will enable application of two different chemicals at once, opening the way to apply a flat rate of pre-emergent herbicide across a paddock plus a knock-down on bad weed patches in the one pass.

Harvest

Two John Deere headers and a chaser bin are used at harvest. The bin speeds up the process significantly by allowing the headers to keep moving. Company trucks carry the grain out of the paddock direct to the piggery where it is unloaded into silos.

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Issues

Aside from the amount of rain, the major cropping issue is dealing with weeds like ryegrass and brome. On advice from their agronomist they have changed their cropping program so that rather than sowing one break crop followed by two or three years of cereal they now structure their rotation so they can get three consecutive years of grass control with the aim of getting the weed seed bank as low as possible.

"In a worst-case scenario I might sow lupins, peas or vetch in the first year of the break; all of which can be used in the piggery," Sam said. "That might be followed with a TT canola then possibly a Clearfield wheat to give three years in a row of good grass control. We also use hay-making or chemical fallows plus grazing to help run down weed populations. After chemical fallow the paddock is kept as clean as possible until sowing the following year. We don't want to hinder the grass control by allowing weeds to grow for the sheep."

Sam is aware of the threat of herbicide resistance so rotates chemicals and occasionally incorporates windrow burning to keep it at bay. He does not use a chaff cart at present but hasn't ruled it out as a future option. "The whole emphasis on chemicals concerns me but I like to retain my stubble and don't want to burn any more stubble than I need to."

To keep the stubble standing, the cropping and sheep enterprises are generally kept quite separate, with 70 to 80% of cropping ground left ungrazed.

Communication

One of the features of the McMahon family that has contributed in no small part to their success is the quality of the communication amongst family and staff. Six or seven years ago they began to have regular facilitated family meetings and these are still organised as needed. Most family members try to catch up periodically, often over lunch, to discuss what needs to be done.

Peter and Jenny are well aware of the succession-planning issues they face with three daughters and sons-in-law all working in the business and they, and

Neville, have had extensive discussions with the family and advisors about how the succession process will occur. Their current plan is to keep going as long as they are able, while gradually handing over responsibility for the running of the business to younger family members.

Advisers

Each aspect of the business has its own advisors, with the piggery part of the Top Network group of piggeries that use the veterinary guidelines, genetics and nutritional specifications required by Coles and Sam using Richard Saunders, of

Dodgshun-Medlin, for agronomic advice.

Future plans

Sam is passionate about no-till farming and stubble retention and tries to avoid running sheep on stubbles. He has recently begun using 2cm RTK guidance for the farm machinery and hopes to begin inter-row sowing next season. "There are just so many benefits to the system with retaining stubble and improving soil structure."

At this stage he is not sure if they will look to further increase the cropping area.





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