

case studies

Michael & Fiona Job

Gunningbar, near Warren, NSW

Michael and Fiona bought their 2300ha property in 1978. Situated between Warren and Nyngan, the property has an average rainfall of 480mm and soils varying between acidic red soils and alkaline black soils.

Up until the crash in the wool floor price in 1991, the property mainly ran 2,500 merino ewes, around 405ha of wheat and 60 cows. The years between 1991 and 2000 saw many changes, a few dry years and little money. The emphasis shifted to growing hard wheat, durum wheat and chickpeas. This was both on 890ha on the home property and share farming an additional 1130ha. The property has 240 ha of flood irrigation which is utilised according to water availability and crop gross margins.

Livestock remain an important part of this farm business. The Jobs now have a small prime flock of crossbreds for lamb production and a 150 head cattle herd. They manage livestock and direct drilling by only grazing cropping country when ground is dry during summer months.

Motivating factors

In the mid- to late 1990s Michael was cropping over 2000ha. He found that it was almost impossible to prepare and plant this area conventionally and, as glyphosate was relatively cheap, he moved to direct drilling. They found it cheaper and less time consuming to spray and use minimum tillage. In recent years this decision has been supported by the lack of available labour.

Benefits

Michael and Fiona see the change to direct drilling as being driven by costs of production and labour requirements. For Michael, direct drilling has enabled them to farm a far greater area than they would otherwise have been able to. It's also clear that they recognise ground cover and no disturbance as key to making this system effective.

Unforeseen problems

There weren't many unforeseen problems. They went into it 'eyes wide open' and Michael kept all his gear. They were able to do this because they'd spent years looking at the experiences of others, at machinery and through a good deal of practical thinking. This has led to several changes in equipment where they have increased tyre breakout pressure to enable moisture seeking with press wheels and a 33 1/3cm row spacing to assist stubble management at sowing. The farm equipment is setup as a 12m sowing unit and a 24m spray rig. This is used across both dryland and irrigated operations where required.

What has been harder to manage is the increasing problem of woody weed in crop paddocks and rising chemical and fuel costs. This has been further impacted by chemical efficacy problems during hot dry summers. As a result Michael sees that using a combination of working paddocks and spraying to control the weeds will help overcome these issues.

Plans for the future

The Jobs feel that they are at the crossroads. The advantages they did have, such as flat, low input, easily worked ground are being wiped out by fuel and chemical costs. Recent hard years have seen little return and while the fat lamb enterprise is good, getting replacement breeding stock is becoming more difficult. This has also meant less employed labour and reduced benefit for Michael of time savings. As a family, their time together is the key to their future.

Michael can see an opportunity to take up contracting as most of the local contractors have gone during the last few years. They say they'll continue to do what they've been trying to do in the past: reduce risk as much as possible from the business.

Acknowledgements

This case study was prepared by NSW DPI's on-ground implementation of conservation farming team, with the valued assistance of the landholder.

Funding for the project was provided by Central West Catchment Management Authority, NSW Department of Primary Industries and Central West Conservation Farming Association.

© State of New South Wales through NSW Department of Primary Industries 2008.

Disclaimer:

Recognising that some of the information in this document is provided by third parties, the State of New South Wales, the author and the publisher take no responsibility for the accuracy, currency, reliability and correctness of any information included in the document provided by third parties. References to specific brands or types of machinery and/or their adaptation do not imply endorsement. Users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information and suitability for a particular property or farming system with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.



NSW DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES