

case studies

Ben & Sue Nicholls

Acknowledgements

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Burdenda, near Tottenham, NSW

Ben and Sue have owned the 13,500ha property 'Burdenda' for 18 years. Located south of Nyngan in the Tottenham area, it is mostly flat country with both black clays and red sandy loam soils.

The average rainfall is about 480mm a year.

Ben combines a wool and prime lamb enterprise, running approximately 12,000 sheep (7,000 ewes), with a herd of 400 beef cows and 3000 ha of cropping. He mainly crops wheat, barley and oats.

Motivating factors

For the first few years, Ben used conventional farming methods. After about 7 years he started to include spraying. However, he found that when his red soil country had been worked, dust stopped the glyphosate impacting on weeds. He recognised the need to leave the stubble in place and limit soil disturbance. To achieve this they began using minimum till, then, in 2005, moved to mostly no-till.

Ben was also keen to reduce costs associated with machinery depreciation that comes with a conventional cultivation system.

Benefits

As a business they are happy to have much less wear and tear on machinery. Through stubble retention and limited soil disturbance they are able to get on the ground and sow when they want to, rather than waiting for soils to dry sufficiently. This has allowed them to purchase larger machines which have achieved economies of scale reducing field costs associated with planting.

The stronger tines Ben is using had an unexpected benefit in that he can now direct drill tight country that he couldn't plant previously. It's meant that they have been able to plant oats and are getting good supplementary feed for stock. They've also been able to direct drill in areas that have become bare with the extended dry and

they are getting groundcover in place to protect these soils.

Using GPS guidance and press wheels are proving to be beneficial to their management system.

Unforeseen problems

Ben realised early that they had to be sure that the first spray was 100% effective. He says that by progressing from weed control through tillage, to spraying and minimum till, and now to using no-till has meant that he's learnt through experience. They have found that any problems have been manageable.

Plans for the future

Currently they have been putting stock on stubbles during summer. In future they plan to use the paddocks in straight crop / stock rotations of 3-4 years. As part of this system they plan to plant Lucerne for a pasture phase.

