

A case for conservation farming

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MOISTURE RETENTION AND CROPPING VARIETY FOR INCREASED YIELDS AND VIABILITY



Robert and Maree Goodear were recognised as CANFA's Conservation Farmers of the Year in 2006. Maree credits this recognition to a combination of management initiatives they have implemented since 1990.

"Our emphasis is on reducing the decline in soil structure, planting trees, actively growing something, whether a crop of grass or ground cover, rotational grazing and caring for the environment".

The Goodear's farming operation is diverse with approximately 550 ha of mixed cropping including wheat, barley, canola, lupins and chickpeas. When a profile of moisture is available after winter crops are harvested, the Goodears also plant sorghum and millet. Mixed grazing complements their farming operations.

Conservation farming practices have seen the Goodear's soil continue to improve along with the commercial viability of their business. There is a harvest every year, which not every farmer can depend on.

"In dry years when conventional farming fails we still produce grain. One paddock in particular has been continually cropped, growing two crops a year in many years."

The benefits that conservation farming has delivered to the Goodears seem endless. "The soil structure has improved immensely, reducing wind and water erosion. The quality of grain produced and yields have improved; pastures are much healthier. We have lots of earthworms and frogs, good signs that the system is working."

Despite the positives, there are challenges that the Goodears have had to work to overcome. Crops can carry over diseases in the stubble and slugs in the soil threaten emerging crops; both of which are combatted by the rotation of a larger variety of crops.

This crop variation is well supported by the moisture benefits that the Goodears have discovered. "We have a greater infiltration of water, better water holding capacity, and very little water runs off our property. When we have a wet year we will double crop to utilise the moisture, when a dry year is predicted we will be more cautious."

When managing drier seasons, the Goodears work with the conditions. “It makes you think outside the square. In dry seasons we purchase in more livestock when they are usually cheaper, and cheaper to grain feed.”

Like many successful businesses, the Goodears prioritise lower inputs and input costs. “The current seasons are making us focus on the cost of production and where the profit is, with a massive variation between enterprises.”

Although widely known as very successful farmers among their counterparts who operate more traditionally, the Goodears would be recognised as conservation farmers. “If we don’t conserve our soils it won’t be there for future generations. It is one thing to produce massive amounts of product from your land but you need to be aware of what you are removing, and be prepared to replace it.”

“Every kilo of produce that is sold from your property, whether it’s grain or livestock, is also taking nutrients.”

Technology plays an important part in the success of the Goodears conservation efforts. “We use GPS steering in our spray rig and our planting equipment and have straw choppers on our header for a better spread of stubble. We are doing some pasture cropping trial work with a combine that we have converted to a disc undercarriage.”

Active members of the CANFA committee, Robert and Maree are advocates of the organisation and its benefits for members. “Organisations like CANFA convey information locally, nationally and internationally. We have access to trial work, field days, workshops and conferences. Sharing information with other like-minded farmers is a great way of letting you know that you are on the right track.”

As part of their effort to encourage landholders across Australia to conserve their soil, Robert and Maree will continue to tell the good news stories of farmers reaping benefits from conservation practices.

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