

Case Study: Learning journey ongoing at Neuarpurr

(Photo and article courtesy of Tom Dawkins)

THE Hawkins family's Brippick property at Neuarpurr on the Victoria-South Australia border offers unique insight into how mixed farms comprising broadacre cropping, irrigation and livestock might continue to evolve in the years and decades to come.

Tara Hindson (née Hawkins), who works on the property with her grandfather Mac, father Peter and brother James, is leading the charge to implement new farming techniques at Brippick which enhance the relationship between the livestock and cropping operations, while reducing the farm's reliance on synthetic chemicals and conventional fertilisers.

The recent introduction of free-range pigs to the property makes use of straw from cereal crops for bedding in the eco-shelters, while pig manure and straw waste is composted and ultimately broken down into a natural fertiliser for spreading on cropping and pasture paddocks.

"We're looking to boost our soil health and also improve drainage in paddocks which often get too wet in an average year," Tara said. "And then in a dry year it should also help us retain more moisture in the soil."

Tara is one of a growing number of innovative young producers in the region who enjoy the many benefits of MacKillop Farm Management Group membership.

"MFMG membership is very worthwhile. The access we have to up-to-date information and people in the know is wonderful," she said.

"The trial work done by the group is just so valuable to local producers because the trials are conducted to suit the unique production systems in our region."

Brippick's average rainfall is about 525 millimetres and soil types vary from loam and black mulching soils through to sand. Wheat, barley, canola and beans are grown alongside irrigated lucerne harvested for seed and



Tara Hindson

Brippick's 10,000 breeding ewes.

"Our part of the world really lends itself to mixed farming because quite often some of our paddocks get too wet for cropping," Tara said.

"We generally crop our higher, better country.

Sheep fit into the program very well, grazing stubbles, lucerne circles and making use of our paddocks which are not so well suited to cropping. The livestock and cropping programs complement each other very well.

"Livestock is a big part of our business. We all enjoy working with the sheep, which helps of course."

Merinos are run on the home farm, with Dohnes on another nearby property. While both flocks are self-replacing, an increasing number of ewes are now being selected for mating to terminal rams.

"The number of sheep we are running suits our operation. It enables us to prioritise our wool production, while also breeding enough replacement ewes and having the ability to produce prime lambs," Tara said.

"We like a bit of diversity in our sheep operation.

It reflects the flexibility we have got across the whole business.

“Sheep really help us with weed management and our crop stubbles – especially beans – are great for our lambs. We graze the lucerne for half of the year and then also have the ability to put stock onto irrigated pasture over summer.”

Assisting members like Tara in striking the right commercial balance in MFMG's recent appointment of a new Livestock Project Officer, with Tiffany Bennett from Rural Solutions contracted to carry out the new role.

Enhancing the value of membership for mixed farmers, the position will provide a central point to access independent information and increased research, development and extension activities on regionally relevant livestock matters. In conjunction with the appointment, a Livestock Trial Results book is set to be published in 2016, collating all the various research and trial work on livestock in the region over many years.

“MFMG has earned the respect of farmers in our region and beyond. It continues to grow and I think its reputation is enhanced all the time,” Tara said.

“It's all about what members want. Plus it's independent, localised and very relevant to our farming systems.”

MFMG members have access to special workshops, field days and other industry events, including regular GRDC updates and the recent Grasslands Society of Southern Australia conference at Naracoorte.

“There is also a great professional networking and social aspect to the group,” Tara said.

“Talking to other farmers and learning about their experiences is always so insightful. MFMG gives you incredible access to some of the most

switched-on farmers in our region.”

This year Trojan wheat has been planted at Brippick for the first time. It is a variety which has been trialled by MFMG and produced impressive results.

“It's just so valuable for us to see those new varieties grown in trial plots right here in our backyard and to discuss them with other local farmers,” Tara said.

MFMG trials on grazing canola has also grabbed Tara's attention and is scheduled to debut at Brippick over summer under centre pivot irrigation, following on from a barley crop in the same paddock.

“Seeing how it works through those trials gives us the confidence to embrace these exciting innovations,” she said.

“In farming you've got to be open to new ideas, no matter how long you've been at it.”

Indeed, Tara's quest to expand her agricultural knowledge has now gone global after she completed a study tour of the United States earlier this year to research compositing methods and soil health.

The trip, undertaken with the support of the Peter Olsen Fellowship, is just the latest part of Tara's agricultural education, which has included study at Marcus Oldham College, working in agriculture interstate, involvement with a lifetime ewe management group and, as she points out, her attendance at MFMG field days and workshops.

Tara travelled to the US with her husband Rob who works full-time at the National Australia Bank in Naracoorte, which is a major supporter of MFMG.

“As part of the trip, we looked at some relevant farming systems and learned more about making better quality compost,” Tara said.

“In Illinois, they are getting the same yields or better from using biological fertilisers. Plus they are getting a premium for their products, so there's proof that there can be a strong business case for using animal waste in this way.”

“It is very exciting to be exploring these opportunities because it has really helped to open our eyes to the biological health of our soils and ways to reduce our reliance on synthetics.”

Tara said that while the science behind biological fertilisers is hardly new, its successful application into their existing enterprise is a challenging process.

“We're keen to see the agronomical benefits to using the compost. We know the benefits are

there, but we've just got to make it work in a modern farming environment,” she said.

“Plus, by reducing our physical exposure to chemicals we feel it is a healthier way to farm.

“And assuming we continue to be challenged by variable seasons in the future, hopefully the use of the compost will boost moisture retention in our soil and, as such, reduce our exposure to both drier and wetter seasons.”



*MFMG Main Trial Site at Frances - taken in October.
Photo Courtesy of Grant Yates, Southern Precision*