

Case Study: Versatility in Mixed Farming at Millicent

(Photo and article courtesy of Tom Dawkins)

MILLICENT mixed farmer Sam Croser is excited about the future of agriculture in the South East and optimistic about tackling the challenges that will test his profitability in the years to come.

The cornerstone of his strategy for success is the diversity of his operation, which produces broadacre and irrigated crops, as well as prime lambs and beef cattle. The Millicent district is renowned for its highly fertile black peat soils and, being less than 15 kilometres from the coast, enjoys relatively reliable average rainfall of about 750 millimetres.

While such variety keeps Sam busy throughout the year, it maximises the farm's productivity while spread seasonal risk and exposure to lacklustre market cycles.

"Seasonal risk is something we need to manage. We've got to be adaptable to the season and be able to capitalise on whatever the year throws at us," Sam said.

Access to information about new technology, crop varieties and farming techniques is another key, which is why Sam has been a member of the MacKillop Farm Management Group for the past four years.

"As a producer I've got to be at the cutting edge of advances in farming and that means having access to up-to-date research and data which is relevant to our region," Sam said.

"The MFMG really is playing a lone hand in that regard."

Sam says the family property was traditionally geared towards livestock production, but in more recent years cropping has been identified as an opportunity to increase profitability.

"Cropping complements our livestock and pasture programs. A bean crop is a good income earner for us and then the stubbles are great for finishing stock on."



Sam Croser

"We also grow canola, wheat, cut lucerne for hay and grow carrot seed, which is quite diverse but pretty typical for this part of the world because the country lends itself to mixed farming enterprises."

The drier seasons which have prevailed in recent years have been a positive for Sam, whose greatest concern during winter is water-logged paddocks.

"The potential to crop in this area has grown in recent years with improved drainage and the drier conditions we've had. It has allowed cropping in areas which have traditionally been too wet," Sam says.

"We also add a bit of extra flexibility to the business by trading livestock in addition to our breeding operations. When you do have a wet year, you don't want to have too many cattle or sheep to carry over the winter."

"I'd rather do a good job with a slightly smaller number of breeders and then when the spring flush comes, we can buy-in stock as other areas

start offloading. With stubbles and irrigated fodder crops, there is quite a bit of flexibility there."

Another recent innovation for the business has been the managed grazing of crops.

"Grazing canola and winter wheat is helping us increase the size of our cropping area while maintaining our stock numbers," Sam said.

"The winter canola crops we've had in the past two years have been really impressive, with the ability run a lot of stock on the crop through winter, then locking it up and getting a big yield."

"The higher rainfall here and the high value of the land locally means you've really got to get as much out of the paddock as you can and I look at grain-and-graze practices as an opportunity to get two crops from a single paddock in one year."

Sam's access to MFMG research has been vital in adopting new practices on his farm.

"There's not too information out there that's relevant to farming in our region, so work done by MFMG really fills that void," Sam said.

"I'm always interested in using new crop varieties and MFMG's trial work is really the main way for me to get access to yield results and other data that I know I can apply to my business."

Sam is also excited about MFMG's expansion into livestock research and extension work.

"That information will be very relevant to mixed farm operators like me and increasingly importantly given the new crop varieties which we can graze as well as harvest," he said.

Sam joined MFMG after seeing the trial results from some of the group's programs. He said his membership has confirmed why MFMG is so highly regarded.

He participated in last year's South East Agricultural Leadership Course which was conducted by MFMG, as well as the group's recent agricultural tours of New Zealand and Tasmania.

"Those tours have been amazing. To spend a week looking at farm systems in other high-rainfall and high-production areas, where the producers are also grappling with the high cost land was extremely informative," Sam said.

"It's the sort of insight into the businesses of leading operators outside of our region that would be essentially impossible to gain if you weren't part of a reputable group like MFMG."

Reduced funding for government-led agricultural research at a time when independent data is more important than ever also makes the projects carried out by MFMG increasingly valuable.

"MFMG is very much a member-based organisation, so producers get to drive the focus of research work being pursued," Sam said.

"It's wonderful to be able to go to MFMG field days and see first-hand the results from trials in local paddocks and on local soil types. That's hugely relevant."

Sam says the most valuable thing about being involved with MFMG is the ability to interact with other members.

"We're able to pool our knowledge and tap into some very unique, specialised information relevant to farming in the South East," he said.

"Getting to know the other members is wonderful and the information exchange that takes place, even on an informal, conversational level, is so valuable."

As a group, members are increasingly vocal about increasing the choice farmers have in

what crops they can incorporate into their businesses, including genetically modified varieties and the cultivation of poppy seeds which is currently illegal in South Australia, but allowed in Victoria and Tasmania.

"I would certainly look at the potential for incorporating poppy seed crops into my irrigated cropping program," Sam said.

"We've seen how growers in Tasmania do it successfully and manage the challenges of growing the crop.

"Growers in our region should have the same options to grow crops as our competitors interstate. If a crop is suitable to grow on my farm and it makes sense commercially, then we should absolutely be giving it full consideration."



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