



Meegan and Andrew Young, "Napier", Coonabarabran, check one of their wheat crops last October.  
**LEFT:** The same crop in June establishing through stubble retained from the previous year.



# Back up on the burning

## DOWN TO EARTH



Bob Freebairn

**S**URVEYS suggest most farmers aim to farm with as little cultivation as possible, many already implementing zero till or no-till farming.

However, autumn fires also indicate many farmers continue to have problems with cereal stubble and resort to burning before sowing.

The main downsides of stubble burning include leaving the country vulnerable to soil erosion (even though late burning reduces but does not eliminate the erosion risk period) as well as contributing to soil organic matter decline.

That burning contributes to organic matter decline has been hard to prove by researchers, especially in western areas even when only occasionally practised.

However, most farmers (and researchers) appreciate that stubble retention helps surface soil friability and rain capture and preserves stored soil moisture.

Southern NSW farmers I met a few weeks ago at the GRDC Research Advisory Committee meetings repeatedly reported in their run of difficult and drought years, where stubble retention was combined with high standard fallow weed control, it was commonly the difference between total failure and two-tonne a hectare crops.

Research has shown in higher rainfall years, when extra stored soil moisture is not needed, stubble retention right through to sowing is less critical and may even contribute to more disease, nitrogen deficiency and sowing blockages.

However, rotations, careful choice of varieties (such as yellow leaf spot tolerant wheats), appropriate sowing equipment and monitoring of nitrogen can manage most of these problems.

Growers handle high stubble loads in various ways.

For example, well-known zero-till Coonabarabran farmers, Meegan and Andrew Young, "Napier", who generally

follow a rotation involving four years lucerne, wheat, canola then two more wheat crops (the last one under-sown with lucerne), have not burnt stubble for more than a decade and successfully zero till all their crops, including when changing from lucerne to crop.

Last year their zero-till wheat yielded from four to five tonnes a hectare and they will manage direct drilling the 2009 crop into the straw residues without the need to burn.

The Youngs have found a cheap, fast and effective way to help break down their stubble is to hire a Stubble Cruncher, a machine developed by Ariah Park farmer, Colin Harper.

Running over their stubble with the Stubble Cruncher splits and breaks up the straw to allow faster degradation as well as easier flow through the planter.

They aim to stubble crunch as soon as possible after harvest.

Once zero-till has been underway for a few years stubble decomposition also increases.

The Youngs have built their own zero-till planter using sowing knife points spread across four bars to ensure plenty of clearance.

Press wheels are an important part of the planter.

Row spacing of 30 centimetres also helps improve clearance, with no detriment to yield.

Their planter is more than robust enough to easily sow into their multitude of clay to sandy soils.

Nitrogen soil fertility has not been a major issue, and their crops are among the highest yielding in their district year-in, year-out.

It seems the nitrogen is largely provided by the lucerne phase although soil and tissue tests are used to keep an eye on possible problems.

Last year fertiliser was only used to correct phosphorus deficiency except a small amount as part of a starter fertiliser.

■ Next week: Save money by minimising on pasture mixes.

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