

HEALTHY SOILS

ADVERTISING FEATURE



Making natural work at Cassilis

CASSILIS farmer, Will Sutton, would like to be using more natural agricultural practices on his property, "Yallambee", but is hamstrung by the realities of maintaining viable returns.

"It frightens me the amount of artificial chemicals and fertilisers we are using on the country, but you have to be pragmatic and make money," said Mr Sutton (pictured).

Mr Sutton, who has already made great progress by retaining his stubbles and lifting organic matter levels, has adopted a policy of slowly introducing more natural products into the system as they can be shown to be effective and profitable.

He said rushing into full adoption of natural farming ways could be a recipe for "going broke very quickly".

"It can be quite expensive and you really have to watch your margins," he said.

"I cell graze my livestock country and look after my native grasses, but the cropping country is one of the hardest things because if you are being paid \$150 a tonne for grain and it costs you that much to grow it, you really have to push production and do it every year."

Mr Sutton said if the wider community wanted farmers to more effectively manage their land in natural ways, farmer income levels needed to rise.

"Whether consumers pay more for their foods or the supermarkets take lower margins, we need to be paid more to do all these things."

Mr Sutton said his next step was to look into the use of stubble digesters and the possibility of green and brown manuring.

Stubble power

By NEIL LYON

A FOCUS on utilising stubbles to build organic matter has been the key to improving soil health on Will Sutton's property, "Yallambee", on the crest of the Dividing Range near Cassilis in the Upper Hunter Valley.

Mr Sutton has a policy of integrating the cropping and cattle enterprises on the 860-hectare holding.

Quality stubbles from last year's five-to six-tonne a hectare barley crop provided useful grazing forage for 300 cattle for two months in summer.

But while the stock were benefiting from the grazing, they were also playing an important role in the soil improvement program on "Yallambee".

Mr Sutton uses a combination of a stubble crimping machine and the trampling effect of stock to put crop stubbles on the ground, encourage microbial activity and spur on the breakdown process.

"There is a symbiosis between soil organisms and livestock," he said.

"Laying the stubble down and having the stock physically trampling it, urinating and defecating on it works well together.

"You get a cycling effect. You start cycling carbon and all the good things that build soil."

In seasons when the soft, friable, black soils of his cropping country are too wet Mr Sutton keeps the stock off to avoid the risk of them causing pugging and compaction damage.



Laying the stubble down and having the stock physically trampling it, urinating and defecating on it works well together.

– Will Sutton

But this hot, dry summer was one of the best for allowing stock onto the cropping country and running the stubble crimping machine over the paddocks.

"I ran the stubble cruncher over it once the stubbles started to get dry and brittle after harvest," he said.

"You should leave it a few weeks after harvest, especially with barley

stubbles that can be quite green and willowy."

Mr Sutton said the machine did not smash the stubble to pieces but crimped it and laid it down to help the micro-organisms "get into it and start doing their job".

"That, along with the urine from cattle and natural nitrogen that is there, feeds the bugs, and in turn that breaks down the stubble which is returned to the soil," he said.

Mr Sutton said without applying such practices to break down the stubble, it would take much longer to decompose and become problematic for machinery sowing following crops.

"This year I have been able to break down a fairly large stubble load to the degree that I can get a fairly simple direct drill combine without cultivating points through it."

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