



MEDIA RELEASE

Wednesday, 7 October 2015

Flexibility in the mix for Makin

WHEN fifth generation Keith farmer Chad Makin returned to his family property in 2007, consecutive dry seasons were putting unprecedented pressure on agricultural businesses across the South East and beyond.

Several more difficult seasons since then have confirmed for Chad that being prepared for dry years is absolutely vital in boosting the viability of farming enterprises such as his in the years to come.

“We need to be able to cope with variable seasons because the climate is always changing. It’s important to accept that and adapt accordingly,” he said.

“We’ve have to have a management plan in place to deal with a dry year and try to spread our risk as much as possible.

Chad, who farms alongside his father Kym, believes flexibility goes hand-in-hand in mixed farming operations which are typical of the Tatiara district. Helping ensure the Makins stay fully up-to-date on innovations which relate to their farm is Chad’s involvement with the MacKillop Farm Management Group.

“When we’re looking at something new and considering a change to the way we do things, MFMG’s independent research and extension work helps us make a more informed decision,” he said.

“The specialised information members have access to really enhances the ongoing learning experience we have as farmers and I believe that dramatically increases our ability to improve our farm businesses.”

Reflecting the balance of a mixed farming enterprise, Chad says the family’s 1500-head self-replacing Merino ewe flock has played a starring role during difficult seasons.

“We’ve found that in these drier seasons, our livestock enterprise has really shone in terms of both market risk and climatic risk,” Chad said.

“If we struggle for pasture growth in the paddock, we have the option of offloading surplus sheep to make a bit of room and make sure we can do a good job with our core livestock.

“It can be a bit of a juggling act with livestock, but it is definitely worthwhile.”

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Assisting 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.

"We've got quite a bit of good heavy loam over limestone which is pretty shallow, but hangs on really well with reasonable spring rain," Chad said.

"Then we've also got non-wetting sand over a small amount of clay and calcrete limestone under that. During the cropping season, most of our livestock enterprise in run on the sandier country, which has lucerne and clover based pastures."

Broadacre cropping is spread over 650 hectares, with an additional 50ha of surface irrigation. Crops are rotated on a beans-wheat-canola-barley cycle, with a pasture phase recently introduced into the rotation.

"Adding a two or three-year medic pasture phase into the cropping rotation isn't necessarily cheap but it's a worthwhile investment and very effective way of getting some nitrogen back into the soil," Chad said.

"In these drier seasons, our carrying capacity on the non-wetting sands has been stretched, so having paddocks set aside for sheep on the heavier country has been extremely beneficial."

Another example of how the livestock and cropping sides of the business overlap, especially during dry seasons, is the grazing of paddocks planted to barley.

"We've been grazing barley crops now for a decade. We're not growing varieties that are specifically bred for grazing, it just comes down to timing and the season for us," Chad said.

"If we're tight for pasture, we will put sheep onto a barley crop, put them in at mid-to-late tillering and then take them out before first-node stage, which is usually about August 1 in this district.

"In an average season, you'll still reap an average to good crop with no yield penalty."

A key to remaining a profitable and productive operation has been the continual modernisation of farming practices, including cropping techniques and the introduction of new plant varieties.

"We've found that changing our seeding system to direct drilling and knife points rather than working the paddock up and using a trash culti drill combine allowed us to gain access to as much as 30 per cent extra water for our crops, rather than losing it to evaporation," Chad said.

“Last year was very dry but it was proof that even with minimal growing season rainfall, we were still able to reap average to just below average yields and I think that was purely due to our seeding system.”

While introducing new practices onto the farm can bring with it a degree of uncertainty, Chad finds his MFMG membership helps him make informed decisions about new techniques and varieties. Chad’s recent appointment to MFMG’s operations committee will boost the focus of the group’s work on trials specifically relevant to farming systems in the Tatiara.

“There is a huge difference between having trials done in a local broadacre setting rather than in a lab environment. And with that in mind, we’re more than happy to help out and provide a bit of paddock space for trial work,” he said.

Chad is also keen to expand MFMG’s membership in the Upper SE by highlighting the benefits of being part of a growing organisation which is driven entirely by local growers.

“I highly recommend producers get involved with an independent group like MFMG, to help it continue to grow and increase its ability to pursue research and other work on behalf of farmers in our region,” Chad said.

“Membership keeps you up to date with what’s happening in our industry in the SE and beyond. The regular field days, workshops, crop walks and other events MFMG is involved with gives us access to some very valuable information.”

“And getting to talk to other growers makes you think a bit differently about any decision to do with farming because you never stop learning in agriculture. Plus the networking opportunities you get as a MFMG member is as big a benefit as any.”

Chad and his wife Kylie have three children and he is overwhelmingly positive about the challenges and opportunities that will likely face the sixth generation of the family to farm at Keith in the years to come.

“I’m very excited about what we can achieve in plant breeding and plant technology,” he said.

“We need to continue to increase our yields and overall productivity and we need to make the most out of the farming land available to us.”

Sharing the views of many South Australian farmers, Chad believes the moratorium banning genetically modified canola in SA needs to be lifted.

“There’s nothing scary about genetically modifying a plant to get us through a dry season or a frost or for resistance to a particular chemical,” he said.

“The technology is there and farmers in other states and overseas are already using it, so we really need to ask ourselves why we’ve been left behind in SA.”

Given the growing global demand for food and the limited amount of arable land available around the world, Chad says that farmers need all the tools available to increase their production and secure their viability.

“It’s very exciting to contemplate the different ways we’ll be able to get maximum our plant, grain, meat and fibre yields in the future,” he said.

“Feeding the world will be one of the greatest challenges we face in the coming century. Humanity has overcome significant hurdles in the past and I’m very confident that we as farmers have the ability and expertise to overcome this one too.”

Ends



Chad Makin

(Photo and article courtesy of Tom Dawkins)