



May 2010

## **Gaining the inside edge**

**When it comes to new crops for the family farm, the Skeers make the most of their MacKillop Group membership.**

By JULIE HINCHLIFFE

If you want to get South East farmer Andrew Skeer's attention, forget the rest of South Australia - talk about which crop varieties do best in Tasmania, Europe and New Zealand.

"We have such a long season here," explained Andrew. "We get about 700 millimetres, with seeding generally starting in May and harvesting starting in January.

"We can relate more to Tassie and countries like New Zealand because of the climate and growing conditions."

The Skeer's 809 hectare family farm 'Sunnybrae', which Andrew and wife Megan manage in partnership with Andrew's parents, is situated at Hatherleigh, about 15kms north of Millicent. The high rainfall, cool climate conditions create a unique set of opportunities and challenges for farming.

Sunnybrae has evolved from a sheep grazing property to a mixed system of cropping, beef cows and cross-bred ewes for prime lambs. The heavy clay and peat soils support a balance of broadbeans, wheat, barley, strawberry clover and canola.

"The last ten years have been more challenging than the previous 50 - we've had to feed stock five years out of ten," said Andrew. "Having the crops gives us more options. We can finish the lambs and vealers on the broad beans."

Keen to see the latest performance data for crop varieties in his immediate area, Andrew was amongst the first to sign up for membership to The MacKillop Farm Management Group (MFMG). His membership gives him access to the results from the National Variety Trials (NVT) conducted in the South East by Trent Potter and the SARDI team from Struan.

"The fact that the trials are so close to us - at Hatherleigh - makes them quite useful to us. As a member, I can look at yields for local trials of wheat, barley and bean. I find the five year averages the most interesting." Andrew said he would also like to see some trials for canola.

"Getting the right variety can really make a difference in your production and therefore your profitability," he said.

Andrew participates in MFMG activities such as crop trial walks and field days. After gleaning as much information as he can from the agribusiness representatives who attend, he examines his swag of fact sheets and local yield data.

The family then runs its own 4-5 ha trials to see how promising new varieties compare with existing crops. "It's expensive to change to new seed. We trial 2-3 new varieties on our property each year. This year we're trialling Commander barley and Preston wheat.

"Gairdner barley is one that has been quite successful for us in the last few years. Also Brennan - a winter wheat variety - we graze our sheep on it until it reaches reproductive phase."

Another farm improvement Andrew attributes to his MFMG membership is better stubble retention. "Belonging to MacKillop has helped us gain the information to go to more minimum tillage. Instead of burning, we are now keeping at least half our stubbles and this is increasing the fertility of our ground."

He said some of the stubbles are so thick, he tends to mulch a lot of them in. "The changes we're seeing are impressive... I can rake my hand through it and see a dozen earthworms."

Precision Agriculture agronomist Felicity Turner said improved soil management is vital for creating more sustainable landscapes. "The MacKillop Group's trials and projects also look at things like water use efficiency, effects of varying management on sustainable farm practices, and the use of spatial measurement tools for identifying differences in land capability.

"In terms of sharing new and innovative technologies with MFMG members, we're onto it," Felicity said.

Started in 1998, The MFMG is a producer driven non-profit organisation for farmers in the high rainfall and cool climate region of the state's South East.

Krysteen McElroy, MFMG Executive Officer, said the group aims to "increase the profitability and sustainability of primary production into the future.

"At the moment, we have 121 farm businesses registered as members. Our activities are supported by 15 sponsor businesses comprising around 40 agribusiness reps.

"Along with the support we receive from GRDC, SENRMB and The Caring for our Country Programme - these sponsors are critical, and we could not operate without their input."

- Details: Krysteen McElroy [mfmfg@bigpond.com](mailto:mfmfg@bigpond.com) or 0408 655 108. MacKillop Farm Management Group website [www.mackillopgroup.com.au](http://www.mackillopgroup.com.au)

## Key points

- The MacKillop Farm Management Group has over 120 farm business members
- Members and sponsors access workshops, crop walks, field days, crop trials, meetings, newsletters, events alerts, annual Research Trials Results & more