Lotsa Little Lots

Analysis done in preparation for the recent NSW Agricultural Services Strategic Planning meeting showed the Harwood Mill Area had a higher percentage of smaller farms than the other two NSW mill areas. Harwood farmers with annual production of 5,000 tonnes or less account for 37% of the total tonnage produced each year. In Broadwater the figure is only 23% and in Condong its 19% (though there is an influence from a greater percentage of year old crops in that). The annual average area harvested by these smaller farming units is 23 ha at Harwood compared to 25.5 ha at Broadwater and 28 ha at Condong (again the 1YO influence plays a part).

So we’ve got a lotsa little lots and more farmers who depend on other sources of income and have to fit their farming work around day (or night) jobs. What works for large farmers and enterprises won’t always necessarily work for smaller enterprises and there are some unique management issues to consider. Recognising that you have to approach things a little differently can be the first step in getting more out of your smaller farm.

Agriculture Victoria has a number of tips to help smaller farmers with time management:

1. **Choose an appropriate enterprise**—Cane farming has some real advantages with work concentrated in really intense periods but the longer growing season allows longer periods where workloads are less.
2. **Ensure the farm is well laid out and has key infrastructure**—Organise the farm to improve the timeliness of operations. Ensure equipment is well maintained and ready to go. If you’ve got limited time you need to be able to react quickly.
3. **Develop a low input farm**—or minimise your inputs—act early to keep control weeds and it will allow you to use lower rates and less expensive herbicides, get your soils sampled regularly to ensure you are using the appropriate application rates and not putting on more than what you need.
4. **Develop a networks of contractors**—Look at the tasks that need to be done and what can be outsourced to contractors. Don’t tie up your time and financial assets in jobs that others can do cheaper and in a more timely or effective fashion.
5. **Develop a source of support labour**—for me this is one of the most useful tips. Can you share a farm labourer across a couple of small farms? Is there an opportunity to employ a retiree with some experience or train up a young local bloke to share with neighbours?. Having an available source of casual labour that can respond to issues immediately can help address this key limiting factor.
6. **Work together**—our area is built on a co-operative approach. Sharing assets can be a more effective way of fully utilising them and sharing information and practices is a great way to develop knowledge.
7. **Form useful networks**—Full time farmers find it easier to attend events and training and to built networks of knowledgeable people. However, modern communication can allow you to develop strong networks with local and global experts via phone or email. It’s surprising how many will reply if you ask.
8. **Make full use the resources that are freely available**—Ag. Services is probably the best example of this. We are only ever a phone call away and keen to help so don’t hold back. Local agronomists and state and federal government bodies also have a wealth of information. Don’t be afraid to ask.

A Sprinkle of Sugar

We look at sugar as our final output but is there a place for it as an input too. US studies by Becks, looked at the impact of applying sugar in the inter-row, measuring if there was an increase in corn yields. The theory is that sugar helps feed and boost microbial populations and, thereby, allows plants to process more nutrients thus raising yields. In 2015 trials, corn yields were boosted by more than 10 bushels per acre through the addition of sugar. In 2016, while no yield difference was observed, the research team noted thicker corn stalks with greater standability and a greener crop at harvest. In 2017, the study applied three different sugar products;
(i) commercial liquid feed grade dextrose, (ii) Carbose, a commercial product that contains a blend of soil bacterium and four different sugars and (iii) Nano Brown Sugar, which contains 48% sugar and 8% humic acid. There were no observed differences in microbial activity at 3 leaf stage and while dextrose delivered a noticeable increase in plant height at 12 leaf stage, there was no observable increase in final yield.

Studies in 2016 of foliar sprays of sugar based products showed that the application of feed grade dextrose also gave a 3.8 bushel/acre increase in soybean yield. In our situation sugar might also have some value as a boost to microbial activity which may not only provide for greater nutrient availability for the cane plant but could also allow for faster decomposition of trash—it’s certainly worth a look.

Don’t Panic!...but it’s time to launch into Torpedo Grass

The first two pictures on the right show infestations of Torpedo Grass (Panicum Repens) - a type of panic grass—over on the Richmond but don’t get complacent because we already have it here with observations in soybean crops and in drains and on headlands. It’s likely already too late to eradicate it all together but we can still work to limit its impact to drains. It takes its name from its sharply pointed (or torpedo-like) growing tips. It can grow to one metre in height and will form a panicle-like flower up to 9 inches long (3rd right) but it’s mainly spread by its rhizome (first picture from left) –either by expansion or fragmentation. Torpedo grass’ rhizomes have an impact on the best control measures. Discing alone can spread it further because it can fragment the rhizome and if tillage is used for control it needs to be followed up with a herbicide application. Always maintain good equipment hygiene. Some sources recommend the use of glyphosate alone but the wrong dosage may just burn off what’s on top leaving a healthy rhizome below to regenerate. In addition to Glyphosate, Imazethapyr (Spinnaker, Amaze) is recommended but check with your preferred chemical reseller to discuss the most effective control. Multiple resprays may be required to gain effective control.

In Florida, where the weed is common, there is a recommendation for a relatively new herbicide, Fluridone—particularly for drain spraying. Fluridone is not yet available in Australia but it is being currently evaluated for release by the APVMA. We’ll keep a look out to see if something comes through. But don’t panic like Corporal Jones or we’re doomed just like Fraser claims. Let’s follow another piece of advice from Corporal Jones, given with bayonet attached and remember “They don’t like it up ’em!!”.

Great Scots and Other Winners

No ball tampering was required when Harwood’s Premier Grade side took to the field in their Grand Final match against Tucabia-Copmanhurst. Harwood rattled up a massive first innings score of 8/325 with captain Nathan Ensbey (75) and Ben McMahon (67) the top scorers. While Mark Ensbey’s 28 runs didn’t quiet match those top numbers the quick fire manner in which he scored them set the pace for the rest of the innings. Tucabia wilted under the pressure when it was their time to bat, making just 118. We then lost track of the lads for a couple of days but events allegedly included a visit to the Shield Cricket semi in Brisbane where the Harwood men gave a sledging seminar to the state representatives. President Tim McMahon limited his activities to driving the team bus and there is no hint that Ross Farlow’s dad, Ron, accompanied him on this particular trip (voluntarily or otherwise).

The cricketers weren’t the only one to score a win lately. John McPhee and Graham Anderson spent their Easter Long Weekend at the 114th Maclean Highland Gathering. John was a clear winner in the Highland Dancing and they shared the spoils in the piping with a trophy each. The battle came down to the shot put or “putting the stone” to use the proper highland games terminology. And they couldn’t be split here either according to recently retired multiple Highland Games Champion, Dr Anthony Young. Can’t wait until next year to see what further shenanigans this pair get up to. Please note certain “facts” contained in this article may not agree with official Highland Gathering results.

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