

The Grower's Word

from James Arnott—Berwicks

In beginning this report I went back over what I wrote last time (August 13) and not much has changed. We've now experienced two poor winter crops in a row and have the second poor summer crop in a row. I'm not sure if this has ever happened in this district before, certainly not in my memory.

The 2013 winter crop was almost a carbon copy of the previous season apart from the conditions at planting. In August it looked magnificent but no more rain until harvest left the crop short of moisture again and final average yield at 3.2Tonnes was particularly disappointing. We have continued with our long term supply contract with a dairy in Muswellbrook for wheat and I locked in a price during August at \$252 ex farm. At the time this looked quite promising but as we now all know, holding off would have been better. The quantity contracted also ended up at about 110% of the final yield so some wheat will have to be purchased to complete the contract. At the time I wrote the contract with the dairy, I was uncomfortable with the production risk and purchased futures against some of the tonnage. This has effectively protected the price for the tonnage I will need to purchase and will allow us to capture a portion of the price rise since contracting. Quality of all wheat harvested this season was good with test weights averaging 80Kg and screenings 4%. 100 hectares of spiffire that was harvested immediately after 186mm of rain showed very little sign of weather damage.

Summer crop planting began in late September with early sunflower and a small cotton trial. The sunflower looked fabulous for most of the season but ran short of moisture at the end and has not filled the heads fully. We should be commencing harvest of these next week and I am hoping for a yield of about 1.8 – 2.0T. With the support of Monsanto, CGS and Pete McKenzie, we have planted a 25Ha cotton crop this season. The crop had a horrible start with cold weather and then water over it but it seemed to recover well and up until three weeks ago was looking promising. The dry weather just got the better of it and the crop shed about 50% of its fruit. I'm not sure if this crop will ever have a fit in the rotation at Berwicks, but it has done much better than I had expected this year given the difficult start. If nothing else it is an exciting experiment and I am enjoying the process. At this stage I intend to run the trial again next season.



Dry conditions again delayed the commencement of sorghum planting. That all changed in November. A fall of 56mm at Berwicks and 65mm at Thurles on 18th was promising and we were just underway when we received another 66mm on 22nd. This was still good but a storm on the afternoon of 23rd delivered 72mm in approximately ½ hour was a bit more than we needed. We were fortunate to be only on the edge of this storm that wrought havoc across properties just to our east. I believe Levondale recorded 200mm in the same ½ hour period. Nevertheless, there was substantial damage to the paddocks from this storm with rills being formed across the farm. In one paddock the water went over the top of the contour banks along their entire length requiring substantial repair works with a dozer prior to planting. Needless to say, establishment was poor to non-existent in these areas. We managed to get our planned 1300Ha of sorghum in but only with the help of Rob Davies who planted 350Ha for us under contract. Thanks Rob, couldn't have done it without you. The maxmerge is just too slow. Taking care to get good establishment along with rills in the paddock, saw us limit travel speed to just 6.5km/h. Applying nitrogen in the same pass lowered the work rate even further and then throw in a couple of broken axles on the gas cart, it all became very frustrating. So, looking to replace the maxmerge before next season, all comments on what works and what doesn't gratefully received. Currently tossing up pros and cons of Norseman, Excel and Boss, all with Precision Seeding equipment.

The cattle enterprise has been going along largely to plan, notwithstanding dry conditions and give away prices. For many years we have spent considerable sums of money spreading legume seed and fertiliser over the native grazing country at Berwicks, and there is precious little to show for this expense. We are still growing a huge bulk of fibre in the form of plains grass but you have to look long and hard to find decent clovers. We decided then to change tack somewhat and divert this expenditure into feed supplements going directly to where it is needed. At the same time introduced an autumn calving, with a 60 / 40 split spring / autumn. We now feed prepared pellets, with a self limiting additive, to the cows through the calving period in self feeders. The dry seasons have led to a much higher intake than planned however it is noticeable that intake reduces with improved paddock feed. This approach has allowed the cows to make much better use of the plains grass and gives the calves an excellent start. Berwicks is now carrying as much livestock as ever, reaching our target 1000 breeders last year (600 spring, 400 autumn). We weaned spring calves in mid January and achieved an average 93% of spring cows in calf which was very pleasing given the conditions. The autumn cows are calving at present and with the recent rain, intake of pellets is close to plan. We are still holding PTMT and CFA cows as well as some of last seasons steers in the hope of a widespread break in the season and improved prices. These cattle will all be sold by end of June regardless.

On the staffing front, we have suffered some seriously bad luck. Steve Meddings, who has been our senior plant operator for many years, was diagnosed with a tumour on his spine and was forced to resign suddenly as a result. Thankfully the tumour proved to be benign and Steve is well on the road to recovery following its removal. Our Overseer, Doug Jamieson sliced the tendons in his hand while cutting a bull and Kerry Tickle suffered a bad fall from a horse after the horse was spooked by low flying F18s. All back at work now but still doing battle with the RAAF over their operations and the effect of their operations on our providing a safe workplace. While on WHS, two weeks before Kerry's accident, my patience wore out on attempting to encourage horsemen to wear helmets, and it was made compulsory. The main sticking point had been the lack of sun protection provided by helmets, which I had finally overcome when I found some well made brims that attach firmly to the helmet. If anyone requires info, I am happy to provide it.



The family are all very well. Adelaide, our eldest is now in year 12 at Frensham, a prefect, and is settling into her studies well. Alice is in year 11 at Calrossy and continues to perform well at hockey, being selected in the Australian Schoolgirls U16 hockey team to tour South Africa in July. Minnie has just started in year 9 at Frensham and while somewhat homesick, is having a lot of fun. Edward is in year 5 at Scone Grammar and can't wait for the rugby season to start again. Seems to be all he is interested in. We spent new years eve on Sydney harbour on a friends yacht for the fireworks which was a great treat and something I'm sure the kids will always remember. All good really.