

CTF – What's the Big Deal?

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TAKE HOME MESSAGE: INNOVATE OR EVAPORATE

I started farming as a dairy farmer in the south west of Scotland. 600 acres (240 ha). 45" (1100mm) rainfall. 160 dairy cows, 50 beef cows, half the farm under crop – much of it used to feed the cattle. Main crops were wheat, barley, and canola. Due to the wet climate, most grain was dried, or treated off the header with preservatives such as propionic acid and caustic soda. We used tramlines for accuracy, and to minimise crop damage. It was not unusual to drive through a crop 7 or 8 times to apply fertiliser, herbicide, fungicide, insecticide, and growth regulator.

We moved to Australia in 1994. We have 1030 ha, of which 350 ha is in crop. We had no idea what equipment we would need, so bought the existing machinery on the farm. The planter was a 6.2 m wide cultivator with mounted airseeder and tynes on 7" (175mm) spacing. We took off half the tynes, and replaced the wide sweep points with narrow ones to improve stubble flow. This machine allowed us to zero-till winter crop successfully, but was not much good for summer. We therefore bought a 2nd hand 3PL summer crop planter with parallelogram planting units. 8 rows x 30" (750mm), with wider rows behind tractor wheels = 6.2m. Sprayer – 18.6m (3 times planter width). Header – random traffic.

Our farm has some flat ground, but most is sloping – up to 7% in some parts, with lots of contour banks.

We have had a Qld Govt Dept Natural Resources/CFI trial on the farm for the past 10 years. It compares crop planted up and down the slope with crop planted across the slope. The trial has shown little difference in water runoff or erosion. In my experience, some paddocks can be badly affected by erosion if planted across the slope.

We have planted crops up and down the slope for approx 10 years. It has worked well in most paddocks; the main problems have been mechanical, particularly the inability to harvest over some of our bigger steeper contour banks. For a time, we planted up and down the slope, and harvested across, but that was very rough on the harvester crossing the wheel tracks.

In 2003 we replaced our 2 planters with one Excel machine. It was 6.4m wide, and allowed us to plant summer and winter crops. It had a mounted twin bin airseeder, with a gas tank towed behind. This allowed us to apply seed, starter fertiliser, and nitrogen in one pass. The header was still unmatched (contractor).

In 2006 we took the plunge and converted to a 3m/9m system. We bought a 2nd hand John Deere 8400 tractor on 3m wheel spacing, and extended the planter to 9m, in order to match a 30' header. We took the airseeder bin off the planter, and put it on a cart, alongside the gas tank. We also bought a 2nd hand Spra-Coupe on the same 3m wheel spacing.

We took part in a project funded by Condamine Alliance, and carried out by CTF Solutions, designed to improve farm efficiency. As a result of this, we completely changed our farm layout. We removed a lot of fences to allow longer runs and removed some contour banks. We put the steepest country into pasture, and reclaimed some flatter area for cropping. We have stopped grazing cattle on crop stubble, and have stopped baling stubble. If we need straw for our cattle, we buy it from our neighbours.

Next step – autosteer, for accuracy and efficiency. It has been difficult to justify the expense. We are looking at setting up network of base stations with other growers.