

# Week 1 – sowing plans and pressures

29 June

The late break forced grain growers to punt on whether to dry sow or not. Weed pressures, missing a window of opportunity and risk of poor germination weighed up in growers' minds. Farmers have different strategies. In the first of a series called *Over the Fence*, BCG posed the following questions to six growers:

- 1. What affects your decision to dry sow? Is it a business decision or just the type of person you are?**
- 2. What are your plans if it keeps raining over the next month?**
- 3. Do you think the previous generations felt the same pressures?**

## Ian Penny – Warracknabeal

Ian farms with his three sons, Cameron, Travis and Andrew, southeast of Warracknabeal and at Nullawil. They produce wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas and canola and run 950 first-cross ewes. Their soils are mainly Wimmera grey friable soils with some red rises and Mallee loam at their farm at Nullawil.

1. "Around 25% of our crop was sown dry (should have done more in hindsight). We use this as a risk management tool to enable us to sow our crop on time.
2. "We will keep trying to sow when we can. There may be some paddocks that currently have magnificent strikes of clover emerging that will be left for hay production."
3. "Yes, but not to the same degree with the financial margins being so much tighter these days. This, combined with the scale of farming now, means the bad years are much worse in terms of financial losses than ever before."



## Tony Robbins - Millewa

Tony and Sue Robbins farm 2100ha, 70km west of Mildura. Ninety percent of their red loam, sand and limestone soils property is arable and continuously cropped with no livestock. One third of their paddocks are sown to wheat, with the remainder in malt barley, triticale, oats and barley cut for hay. Depending on the season or soil type, lupins, vetch or a higher percentage of oats may be sown.

1. "This is our first year of no-till after approximately 15 years of minimum till. The decision to sow dry (did approximately 40%) was made with a number of factors. I usually sow a small amount (5-10%) dry but with this year's summer rains, our soil tests showed approximately 25mm of subsoil moisture. So the risk is not as high with no subsoil moisture.

A crop has been sown every year, so as the season gets later, timeliness gets critical. With a large area to sow myself, it is easier to get some done dry on paddocks that have a good clean history for grass weeds. In our low rainfall area, the trick is to get the crop up. It will then sit there for a month or two with minimum rainfall. The early sown crops do best virtually every year.

Farming is a bit of a gamble so dry sowing is similar but the returns can be good. With no-till it also showed me to apply treflan on dry and with minimal rainfall the crop is up and away. At the end of the day it is a business decision based on weighing up risks involved. As the season has turned around I have found the bonus of no-till is that I can get on paddocks within hours of the rain stopping. The time of the break means that lupins will not go in and will instead be replaced by cereals."

2. "If it keeps raining, the timing of post-emergent spraying will be critical. If it is not done on time weeds will quickly outgrow the crop and expenses will rapidly increase as higher rates or different chemicals will have to be used."
3. "The pressures felt by the current generation of farmers are more open than in the past. Meaning, that now we know the risks and we have to constantly monitor prices. With the real value return for wheat on a downhill slide ever since the 80s, the price growers receive is actually governed by the Chicago Board of Trade, through the AWB, unless we are confident enough to manage their own risk eg. bank swaps, contracts etc.

There are many ways a farmer can reduce risk by increasing knowledge (eg soil testing, looking around at what other farmers are doing, talk to an agronomist, timeliness of operations, grain contracts, grain variety type for situation, growing a spread of cereals evens risk out on prices and labour requirements at harvest). At the end of the day, you can grow a ten bag crop on five inches of rain and a five bag crop on ten inches, but there are many tools now available to spread this risk to a better level.”



### **Doug Russell – Donald**

Doug farms with his wife Robyn on their property, 7km northwest of Donald. They employ a part-time worker and have a son and daughter who also help during their spare time and holidays. They grow wheat, barley, lentils, canola, grazing oats, lucerne and vetch, with their soils ranging from black self-mulching to sandy loams. The Russells also run a Poll Dorset stud and hold an on-property sale in October each year.

1. “We sowed about 20% of our crop dry this year. I wished I'd sown more but didn't have confidence in the weather to keep on going.”

2. “To put some new tyres on the tractor, I actually went in to our local supplier and ordered them - they laughed and said, “Join the queue!”

Also we will plant some more trees this year.”

3. “After going through the driest eight years on record in this area, I understand how tough the 1930's and 40's must have been for the previous generation.

Probably the biggest difference is the cost of inputs that we have today just to produce a crop. This has been the "killer" for grain producers in our area over the past decade.”



### **Eric Yetman – Patchewollock**

Eric farms with his wife south of Patchewollock. Their son Reece has just returned to the farm and another may return after he, too, learns a trade. The Yetmans have land at Speed and lease more near Hopetoun. Their soil type ranges from red loam to sand over clay to deep sand. They grow canola, lupins, wheat, barley and peas.

1. “It is definitely a business decision – you have so much to put in. I am direct-drilling now. A lot of my weeds are, not under control, but at a manageable level and I targeted paddocks that were pressure-free with weeds. I mainly sowed Clearfield canola and Clearfield wheat and lupins in paddocks where I can come back and take any pressure out that's there if I have to.

It kicks the program off. Twenty percent of my program has gone in and as soon as it rains, it is out of the ground and growing.”

2. “I have been sowing ever since it has rained and we have only got a week to go. So over the next month, hopefully it will all be up and we will be spraying it.

I ordered my paddocks in terms of week pressure and used different herbicides on different paddocks depending on the weeds present or the potential.

I use a private consultant to monitor and manage weeds and disease and we know where each paddock is at. It seems to be working well.”

3. “Certainly not with weeds. I know when I first started we did not put the effort in that we do with grass weed control now because they didn't seem to be a problem. They have been allowed to build up over the years, and grasses can choke a crop right out.

The previous generation didn't have marketing decisions; now we have a lot of options.

Financially, a lot of the old blokes make plenty of money. It was not costing them a lot to grow a crop and they were getting similar prices for their grain to what we are getting now. In the 70's grain was worth similar to

what it is now but the inputs have gone up to buggery. They would not have had the financial pressure in terms of returns on your investment per acre.

There is not a lot of room for error these days. Years ago it seemed you sowed the crops and they grew. Lately there seems to have been more dry seasons than wet ones.

Modern technology makes things a lot easier, but they can also make things harder until you have learnt them or become used to them, whether it's computers for grain marketing or auto-steer on your tractor."



### **Ron Schneider – Rupanyup**

Ron farms 400ha of grey self-mulching soil on the Lallat Plains, east of Rupanyup. Half of his land is sown to cereals with the remainder in legumes and oilseeds.

1. "Canola is sown at a similar time each year, so I often sow dry if the season has not broken. Due to its early lush growth, canola has the ability to choke out most weeds that germinate. Because of the wider sowing window for cereals, I would prefer to sow after rain to get a kill of weeds. I sow with a combine with complete cultivation. However, I was preparing to sow some wheat and barley dry if the rain had not come."

2. "My plans would not change as the remaining cereals and pulses would just be sown later."

3. "To my knowledge, previous generations did not have such a long dry period of dry seasons, which has certainly put a greater financial pressure on farmers (also small business). Also, previous generations farmed at a more leisurely pace and had much less red tape to contend with. The greatest pressure for me is at harvest time with the marketing of grains. Earlier generations also had this problem, as my father often told me it was a great step forward when the AWB created the wheat pool as the only market for wheat in the 1940s. I have heard more complaints about the price of wheat since multi-buyer marketing has been re-introduced than in the former wheat pool days.

I also feel those operating the smaller family farm undergo less pressure than those involved in a large farming enterprise."



### **Graeme Hill – Kewell**

Graeme and his wife Nola run a 700ha grain property and small vineyard with their son Caleb, 40km northeast of Horsham. Soils are red clays to grey loam. They grow equal areas of wheat, barley, lentils and peas, as well as chickpeas. In other years they have sown canola, medic, vetch and beans.

1. "My decision to dry sow is mainly a business decision. I believe it's good to sow a percentage dry if the season is late. Yes, there are risks either way, but when the rain comes I won't be making a mess of any fallowed ground and there will be no moisture loss through a sowing process. If it does rain and continues, the undisturbed ground (ie retained stubble) will dry out sooner for sowing.

Timing of germination has a big effect on potential yield, so unless we have a very late and wet spring I need to be up-to-date with sowing time.

If I have to re-sow I've kept enough seed to do so, with most of my sowing done."

2. "I plan to take one day at a time and see what comes. It would be wonderful to have a wet season – it gives hope for the future."

3. "Previous generations had huge pressures but they were different. Physically they worked harder with the mixed farming enterprises they had (ie most farms had pigs, milking cows, beef cattle, sheep, and grains), but with specialised grain farming, quality control and the continued long dry seasons with little water for farm dams, the financial and psychological pressures are enormous.