Flexibility in layout & crops

Ian & Sharon Sutherland

Coleambally Murrumbidgee Valley

- Lasered contour layout, raised beds, border check
- Surface water
- Rice, soybeans for grain; wheat, oats, canola, faba beans for seed & grain

The growth of the Sutherland farming business is typified by making the most of opportunities. Doug Sutherland drew the home farm *Thisldo* in the newly developed Coleambally Irrigation Area in 1965 and bought an additional block across the road in 1973. Though predominantly a rice grower, he was one of the first Coleambally farmers to grow soybeans and seed crops on raised beds.

Ian Sutherland continues the business, which has changed significantly, reflecting the ongoing philosophy of making the most of the opportunity at hand. Ian worked as an industrial chemist before he and his wife Sharon returned to the farm in 1976. Doug has since retired and Ian purchased an adjoining farm five years ago and now farms 660 ha.

The three blocks incorporate a range of soil types, which really determines what can be grown. Soil testing carried out by Coleambally Irrigation early in the farm's history showed that much of the home block was only suitable for rice growing one year in four (further testing recently resulted in much of this '1 in 4' country being declared unsuitable for rice) whereas the other two blocks have much more rice 'friendly' soils. As a result, rice production has been limited to 60–70% of the area used over the past 15 years.

Ian said even though all three farms are separated by roads, they are treated as a single entity which gives him relative flexibility to get the most out of his 4190 ML entitlement. All three farms have a recycling system and a 50 ML storage is currently being planned for one, which Ian said will give him the ability to water one or two paddocks at critical times.

Rice vital to the program

The combined effects of reclassification of rice growing land and reduced water allocations steered the Sutherlands towards growing new crops – mainly for the higher value seed market. Before the recent water cuts, Ian would grow two crops of rice (usually long grain) achieving a typical yield of around 9–10 t/ha. Experience has shown him to "aim for a good average crop year in, year out, rather than a super top crop and blow it". Ian sees rice as a very reliable crop to grow and vital to his cropping programme.

"It's a great crop to grow to clean up any weeds, particularly important when following with a winter seed crop."

Ian found growing two rice crops back to back cleaned up any annual phalaris and wild oats enabling him to then grow a seed oat crop. After the oats were harvested, the paddock would usually be polished and 'turned around' to border check or beds.

Flexibility in layouts

Ian said "there's no such thing as the ideal layout" and matches his layout to soil type, slope and run length. Although beds give him the flexibility to grow a wide range of crops, he prefers border check on his 'red non-subbing' country. Ian said "the key is to get water on and off quickly". To do this, his system is geared up for high flow rates and he is able to water border check bays in around eight hours. Ian also 'pushes' high flow rates through his beds. He uses large 250 mm syphons to water into a 'pontoon area' which then flows over into a number of furrows. Although he is normally on 12 hour shifts, watering this way allows him

to put 12 ML down 20 beds and potentially get water on and off in four hours.

Ian said they can grow just about anything and they try to keep their options open. He has no fixed rotation. Instead he makes his crop choices based on the soil type, paddock history and layout, herbicide history and market influences.

Seed production going strong

The Sutherlands have been growing seed crops, particularly seed wheat, for 25–30 years. In recent years of low water allocations they haven't grown their usual areas of rice and have concentrated more on the winter crop seed market. In 2007 they had five different varieties of seed wheat, as well as oats and canola for seed, and a crop of faba beans. Ian said the continuing low water allocations meant there was the lack of rice in his cropping programme, making it a challenge to find paddocks suitable for seed crops.

The Sutherlands have grown up to nine different varieties of seed wheat at one time and Ian admits it can sometimes be a lot of mucking around and "a lot of time is spent cleaning the header". Ian said it has all been worth it however, "as we have proven our loyalty and built up a relationship with the seed companies and they now usually approach us". The Sutherlands find being on irrigation is an advantage as they can often secure a market because they are able to pre-water which allows sowing to be done on time. They also have segregated storage on farm which is an added attraction from the seed company's point of view.

The Sutherlands ran ewes and lambs until two years ago but found it a struggle, particularly at harvest time when Ian would be flat out and "you'd always have to muck around with sheep". Sharon's suggestion over the years "to get a B-double and get rid of the lot" was initially laughed off, but in the end that's exactly what they did and they got out of sheep at the peak of the market. They now agist sheep to clean up stubbles, which saves on herbicide costs and labour, and when the feed has gone, the sheep go.

Technology the way of the future

Ian thinks a future step to seeking further water efficiencies will be some sort of pressurised irrigation and he has been toying with putting his front paddock under spray or drip, however he still finds it hard to justify the economics. Ian also feels he can further improve his surface irrigation, particularly in regards to automation.

"I have grown soybeans on four-hourly water shifts but the workload soon took the shine off that".

He sees automation as not only easing farm management but significantly increasing water use efficiencies as the quick shifts are more achievable.

Ian's attitude towards his farming has always been one of keeping an open mind to the application of new technologies, paying attention to detail, minimising risk and maintaining complete flexibility with his layout and rotation. This attitude has proven itself to Ian and Sharon in the past and with every drop of water counting now more than ever, will no doubt help them to continue to thrive in the future.

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