

Finding a better way



The Wiseman family

Coleambally Murrumbidgee Valley

- > Raised beds, subsurface drip
- > Surface water
- > Organic onions, soybeans, lentils, chickpeas, linseed, pumpkins

The farming business of the Wiseman family at Coleambally has changed over the years with gained experience and the development of a sustainable production system suited to their particular farming environment and their business aims.

In the late 1980s, Neill and Gina Wiseman became concerned about their 'higher than average' water use for growing rice, so set about to change their system. Encouraged by the potential of double cropping they converted their traditional rice-wheat enterprise on a flat layout to a more diverse range of crops grown on raised beds.

Firm believers in stubble retention and water recycling, the Wisemans managed to successfully produce three crops over an 18-month period for several years. However leading up to 1997, they started to have major problems with crop disease, noticed their soil structure was suffering and realised they had to manage their farm differently if they were going to be sustainable in the long term.

Going 'high input' organic

In 1998, after much soul searching and research, the Wisemans decided to convert two fields of their property to an organic production system. One for onions and the other for soybeans, as both crops were in good demand at the time if grown organically.

They were originally put off going organic because of the "low or nil input idea" that a lot of organic farmers have. But once they discovered that alternatives such as rock phosphate could be used to replace nutrients removed by the crop they started to devise their own production system. The key aspects of

their system are: nutrition (lime, rock phosphate and micro nutrients); soil biology (getting the soil microbes working better by feeding them) and green manure crops (such as faba beans ploughed in at flowering).

Although there were problems with their first crops, the potential for an improved and profitable system was realised and their whole farm was converted to organic production the following year.

Neill and Gina have been joined in their business by their sons Ryan and Luke. The family business is now 'A' certified organic, and the family has converted 403 ha of their own property to organic production and leases a further 117 ha. They grow a variety of crops including soybeans, lentils, chickpeas, linseed and pumpkins.

Onions are grown on a relatively small area of the property but it is the highest valued enterprise, followed by soybeans.

Working out the best system

The Wisemans have 6 ha of subsurface drip irrigation for vegetable production, where they are currently trialling broccoli. They said they still have a long way to go to get the best out of their system however they think they will probably expand their use of subsurface drip in the future not only because of the increased water use efficiency, they can achieve but also because it aids in weed management (less soil is wetted therefore there is less area of weeds germinating).

"We have come across a few problems in design and the pipe is a hassle with paddock operations. We will eventually work these out but at the moment the drought has placed too



many restrictions on further development of the drip system," Gina said.

Weeds are the biggest threat and production cost in an organic farming system. Timing of control is critical and keeping on top of them requires continual monitoring. Weeds are controlled by a pre-irrigation and when dry, a raking with a long fingered harrow. A gas burner is used to kill weeds on the onion ground just before the onions emerge. Cultivation is then used between the rows for most crops. The plant rows are weeded by hand.

Neill said pests are not usually a big threat to them as long as their management is good, and soil and crop health are kept at an optimum state, with green manures being an integral component. Green manure crops such as faba beans are a vital part of their rotation as they not only increase organic carbon and promote soil microbial activity, but they also provide nitrogen for future crops.

The Wisemans have put down a limited-licence bore which they are aiming to buy water for and have plans for an 80 ML on-farm storage to alleviate the problem of not having water when the onions need it, ie early winter before the channels are full.

"As water becomes scarce and a more expensive commodity, we are being forced into becoming more self-sufficient," Gina said.

Opportunities abound

The Wiseman sons, Ryan and Luke see great potential in the market opportunities for organic produce.

"It's like being in a lolly shop and not knowing which one to eat first, there are so many niche

markets out there just waiting to be supplied," they said.

The Wisemans see future opportunities in diversifying the farm into smaller components that complement each other. They would like to start up an organic chicken operation in mobile pens. The chickens would be fed farm by-products such as soybean splits; they would clean up the weeds and unwanted insects; they would fertilise the paddocks; and they would provide the Wisemans with an income from eggs and meat. They also see an opportunity to produce wool and meat from sheep which are brought in to 'clean up' ditches and laneways. Already employing five to ten casuals, the Wisemans say to further diversify into such enterprises they would need to employ several "managers" to "complement their system and make it whole".

"Mum and Dad have put their hearts and souls into this farm and into working out how to make it happen. We believe in organics otherwise we wouldn't still be here but it isn't for everyone. It's just like we know we all can't grow grapes or almonds. Diversification is the key," Ryan and Luke said.

Neill and Gina believe the future is bright, that the drought will break one day, and normal levels of production will return.

"We need to learn from this experience but at the end of the day people need food and they will need farmers to grow it," Gina said.

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