

Climatic experiences cornerstone of farm evolution

THE FARM

Robert and Belinda Morrison

Yandoit Dairy Farm, Yandoit via Daylesford

The challenge for Robert and Belinda Morrison is to try and keep everything up and running during adverse climatic conditions.

Rob is the fifth-generation farmer on the property and not only has he and his family survived, but the farm too has managed to survive tough droughts and floods to return profits thanks to instinctive management decisions.

The weather is a big issue to deal with and monitoring it regularly is a part of Rob's farm survival.

"I monitor it daily on the TV and radio, and everyone knows to be quiet when the weather is on. I also use the web for

specific activities, such as cutting silage," he said.

"I try and get a feel for what's coming 12 months out as best I can. And sometimes, as the saying goes, you've got to plan for the worst and hope for the best."

Taking advantage of what the weather is doing can bring benefits.

Last year's late spring rain filled dams, but other farmers cursed that it also wrecked hay. However, following a forage turnip crop, Rob used this rain event to sow sorghum and the March rainfall finished it off nicely.

"It is a high risk putting in a summer crop, but it is worth a shot. The worst case is

BUSINESS SNAPSHOT

- Number of cows: 110
- Seasonal milking: Autumn / Spring
- Area of farm: milking area 41 ha, farm 300 acres
- % irrigation: small amount of irrigation is used on high-value lucerne 3/ha
- Irrigation system/water source: Bore with travelling irrigator
- % supplementary feeding: wheat, pellets, silage, hay and straw
- Predominant pasture species: annual and perennial clover and ryegrass.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Select the right crop and use free advice from seed companies. There is a vast range of pasture and fodder crops available to suit a wide range of rainfall, soil type and climate.
- Timing – be prepared to act at an opportune time e.g. have the ground prepared early.
- There are advantages to be had from double cropping and establishing crops early.

Rob Morrison strives for a balanced farming system that includes healthy calves and cows.



that we lose the seed, but the flip side is that the ground is ready to go in the Autumn," he said.

A direct drill has been a crucial purchase for the business, as it also allows Rob to take advantage of weather opportunities.

"Direct drilling not only saves time, fuel and moisture, it gives me the ability to act without delay when soil moisture and or ground temperatures are right," he said.

Changes made to the farming system

The farming system has always included lucerne, perennial pastures and some fodder crops. However, now a wider range of fodder crops, such as lucerne, forage cereals, perennial herbs and annual clover and ryegrasses are used, with less reliance on traditional perennial pastures.

"With what seems to be more sporadic rainfall, and with only 3 ha of irrigation, I have felt the need to diversify my fodder production to take advantage of what each season has to offer," Rob said.

Great importance is placed on soil fertility, crop selection and grazing management. This is done to maximise the return on soil moisture and a crop's genetic potential.

Due to the size of the property, strip grazing has replaced rotational grazing, in order to give pastures and crops time to establish and recover, and to help maintain a feed wedge.

Production and financial opportunities realised

Although Yandoit Dairy Farm is a small enterprise it is still a profitable business that provides a valuable and enjoyable lifestyle.

The fact that four generations of dairy farmers before Rob had made a living from milking cows gives him tremendous satisfaction that he too can manage the land and business through the tough times.

"An opportunity came up to crop a neighbour's paddock that had become run



Keeping a close eye on what the weather is doing has brought benefits when cropping for Rob Morrison.

down over many years. After soil testing and working on correcting many of the deficiencies found, it was pleasing to see how a largely unproductive piece of land could be turned around," he said.

The Morrisons try to produce as much feed at home as possible, as well as keeping the cost of production at a level that can cope with fluctuating income, even if that has to be at the expense of high production figures.

When feed, such as straw and grain, has to be bought in, Rob has found it imperative to develop a strong mutual relationship with his suppliers throughout good and bad years.

He also believes it is important to foster a relationship with seed companies, as they are an important sources of advice when making decisions about which crops best suit his needs.

Sharing knowledge

Rob likes to share his experiences in the hope that others who are facing tough times may also remain profitable. At the same time, he is well aware that he can learn from others.

"Watching what works well on other farms in the local area has also been a good source of inspiration, so it's important to keep an open mind and be prepared to have a go," he said.

"When it comes to farming systems there is no such thing as one size fits all. Sometimes a degree of adaptation and failure may be necessary to succeed, but having a positive attitude and the willingness to persist can make all the difference."

When you consider that the Morrisons are virtually the only remaining dairy farm in the region it must be very rewarding when they have their successes.

CONTACT

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