



CASE STUDY

Gary and Kerry Butcher - Pithara

Gary and Kerry Butcher and their son, James operate a mixed farming operation near Pithara.

The family property 'Elena' covers 2,800 arable hectares of salmon gum to sandplain country. Gary is a third generation farmer and generally crops 2,200 ha in a wheat pasture rotation as well as running 1,300 Merino ewes in a self-replacing flock.

The ewes lamb in June and Gary reduces stock numbers prior to summer by culling dry ewes and poor weaners. This enables Gary to carry the maximum number of sheep possible over the summer period. Gary will carry wether lambs through to an appropriate weight for the lamb market but may sell some of these as shippers if the year is poor and they cannot achieve the weight gain.

Each year Gary culls 25 percent of his weaner ewes to get rid of poor wool types. If these 25 percent are kept they are mated to terminal sires, along with five year old ewes and their cross - bred offspring can be sold earlier than pure-bred lambs as they are able to gain weight faster.

The other 75 percent of the Merino ewe weaners are mated to Merino rams for the next four years. Gary aims for quality in both the wool and meat of the sheep and therefore targets both markets.

The long term average wheat yield for the farm since the adoption of minimum tillage in 1993 is 1.7t/ha, However the average wheat yield for 2006 was reduced to 0.75t/ha, when only 158mm fell in the growing season (Apr-Oct). Annual average rainfall is usually 350mm to 250mm.



Gary and Kerry Butcher

The Butcher family have experienced drought conditions for two years in the past five which has brought their five year wheat yield average to 1.14t/ha, highlighting the importance of livestock in the enterprise mix.

Although wheat is the biggest income earner in the district, stock are used to reduce risk, diversify income and control weeds.

Throughout the year, sheep are run on a variety of volunteer and improved pastures as well as crop stubbles.

Gary usually sows approximately 400ha to Caliph medic and Cadiz serradella on an annual basis and in the last two years has been sowing the Cadiz in a mix with oats and a further 200ha of oats alone.

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Many growers within the Liebe region have begun sowing grain oats to provide early feed for stock and to defer grazing on newly sown or germinating improved pastures.

This was common practice in years gone by, but has become less so over the past 10 years. Growers have reverted back to grazing oats such as Pallinup as they are not getting the early season bulk needed from improved legume pastures.

Once the oats grow past ear-emergence they become unpalatable, forcing stock to eat the weeds and so providing another tool in the integrated management of weeds.

‘Elena’ lies within a salt lake system that flows into the larger Ballidu Lake system. Consequently, the farm has 1,100ha of salt affected country. The family have long been advocates for landcare and Gary is the president of the Pithara Dalwallinu Landcare Group.

Gary can see the benefit of improving saltland

for grazing and since 1997, he has sown 60ha to saltbush. The established blocks of saltbush have proved to be useful in filling the autumn feed gap as well as providing shelter at lambing time.

Saltbush paddocks are small so that ewes are not far from water which reduces the risk of separation from the lamb.

“Saltbush is a valuable part of our system and has helped to reduce lamb deaths,” Gary says.

The Butchers have sown a mix of sub-tropical perennial grasses and lucerne in the inter-row of the saltbush alleys. The mix was sown in September 2005 and has established well.

“This district is not traditionally one where perennial grasses have been grown in the past,” Gary says. “But they are surviving and providing a good sub-storey and additional feed to the saltbush.”

The Butchers will continue to expand their areas of saltbush over the next five years.



Gary uses this area as a safe lambing environment with Saltbush rows and sub-tropical perennial pasture inter-row

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