

# CROPPING

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**Fertiliser focus** Cut costs with worm treatment

## Input alternative kicking goals

By PAULA THOMPSON

**T**HE use of an alternative nutrition product has helped Vic Mallee farmer Marc Bowen and his family cut their yearly input costs to less than a third of their previous bill.

He farms at Carwarp as part of a family enterprise with his father Jon and brother Brady.

Brady and Marc are the fourth generation on the farm.

"All up, we run 10,000 hectares," Marc said.

"We crop about 5000ha, and also run 1500 Merinos and 400 head of cattle, mainly Herefords and Limousin."

The family mostly sell livestock through the market system, with sheep going to Ouyen, Vic, and cattle to Swan Hill, Vic.

"But, sometimes we do sell over-the-hooks to Thomas Foods International in Murray Bridge," Marc said.

Traditionally, the cropping program has always focused on cereals.

"We always used to just grow wheat and barley," he said.

"But, we've started to use peas

### Key points

- Yearly nutrition bill slashed
- Easy application as foliar spray
- Speeds up seeding

as a rotational crop. We're in our second year of using peas as a break crop to try and increase nitrogen in the soil."

Clearfield technology has been a great boost to on-farm results.

"We've been using Kord and Grenade wheat to clean up grasses in our paddocks," Mr Bowen said.

"We also use the traditional wheat variety Scout."

Scope is the preferred barley variety.

"We used Scope not only because it's a Clearfield, and to clean up the grasses, but we also use it for sheep feed," he said.

The Bowen family started using Australian Vermiculture's Progro product after hearing about it from fellow Mallee farmers.

"Don and Caz Rankin, who farm at Werrimull, Vic, were the first in the area to use it," Marc said.

"They are Brady's father-in-law

and mother-in-law, so we heard about the success they had with it.

"We thought we might have a look and try it."

Australian Vermiculture was set-up by Brendon and Del Price.

It started back in 1997, with the couple researching and investigating the commercial possibilities of utilising earth compost worms as a tool to best treat various waste streams.

Since then, the company has developed a range of products.

One of these is Progro, a nutrient and biologically rich liquid fertiliser.

The product is brewed using 13 different processes and inputs to produce an end product that has a diverse range of microbial life.

Increased microbial activity results in the increased biological release of soil nutrients.

By enhancing the soil biology Progro offers disease protection, minimising the need for pesticides, improving nutrient availability and the decomposition of toxins.

Marc said the financial advantages of using the product were substantial.

"We were spending up to \$180,000 a year on fertilisers," he said.

"We were spending that money and not getting the returns back on it.

"These days our bill is about \$50,000."

This huge cost saving has come at no detriment to the crop, with



**FAMILY ENTERPRISE:** Mallee farmer Marc Bowen with son Cooper, 3, wife Emily and daughter Ella, 14 weeks, at their family's Carwarp, Vic, farm.

no yield disadvantages.

"I haven't seen an increase, but there's been no decrease either," he said.

"Yields are on a par with what we used to get with conventional fertilisers."

The product is put on as a foliar spray when the crop is at about the three-leaf stage.

"I see a lot of benefits to putting it on this way," he said.

"It makes it much easier at seeding time. You don't have to stop the seeder and put fertiliser in."

And, there are other benefits. "We have noticed that the stems of the wheat seem to be a lot

stronger, and they seem to be able to get through a frost easier," he said.

Crops are looking good at the family farm, with the property receiving 225 millimetres of rain for the year.

"The crops have held on through the hot days we've had a lot better than we expected," he said.

"We had a lot of our season rainfall just after seeding, and since then it's been fairly steady, although it has dropped off in the last couple of months, with just a few showers coming through."

### Behind the headline

MOVING to an alternative fertiliser has helped slash costs for Vic farmers the Bowen family. And, with traditional fertiliser prices relatively high this year, and limited crop cheques coming in from some areas this season, interest in alternatives is likely to grow. The cost of fertiliser is unlikely to drop anytime soon, with the Australian dollar at about US72 cents. Some analysts are predicting the \$A could go as low as US65c next year, which would put further pressure on the cost of imported products such as fertiliser.



**FIELD DAY:** At a field day run by Australian Vermiculture were Carwarp, Vic, farmer Marc Bowen, Microbiology Laboratories Australia's Ash Martin and Marc's father Jon Bowen.

### Crop inspection at Carwarp highlights cereal success

**A**USTRALIAN Vermiculture ran a field day near Mildura, Vic, on Wednesday last week, attended by about 50 people from as far afield as Yorke Peninsula.

One of the keynote speakers was Microbiology Laboratories Australia's Ash Martin.

Mr Martin urged growers to look at their gross margins, as well as yields.

"Calculating your overall returns is the most important thing," he said.

"You can go broke growing the best crop in the district if your costs are too high."

Mr Martin said one of the best aspects of the Australian Vermiculture products was that they unlocked soil nutrients.

"Historically, 70 per cent to 80pc of phosphorus applied has been locked up in the soil," he said.

"Another key thing is that you're getting earlier root development, which sets the crop up for later on in the season."

Mr Martin said applying the Australian Vermiculture Progro product was similar to putting out a couple of hundred kilograms of synthetic fertiliser like DAP.

"But, it comes from a natural nitrogen fixation system," he said.

Good early vigour was another benefit.

But, Mr Martin warned it would have different results in different types of soils, with calcareous ground taking longer to show results.

In the first site visited on the field day, the Bowen family farm's paddock was in its fourth year of Australian Vermiculture treatment, with no other N inputs. Jon Bowen said he had noticed a big difference in the paddock.

He said he was getting about 1.4 tonnes a hectare from his wheat crops. The paddock is in its fourth year of wheat-on-wheat.

"I've been cropping this paddock for the past eight years, and I've never had yields like this since I've been cropping it," he said.

Jon said he was happy with how flats had yielded.

He said his next challenge was to try and improve yields "in the hills".

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