

CROPPING



COST-SAVING: Robert Matthews, Meringur, Vic, has enjoyed a significant reduction in input costs since switching to biological fertiliser products.

PRODUCTS HELP TRANSITION TO NEW FARMING MIX

THE time and cost savings of using Australian Vermiculture biological fertiliser products has enabled Robert Matthews to begin a transfer to a more diverse farming system at Meringur, Vic.

He said he has transitioned into sowing his entire 2400 hectares, with two-thirds wheat and the other third a legume, such as vetch, for feed.

"We changed to that because of increasing wheat yields because of better weed control," he said.

"It'll keep the chemicals working longer and allows you to run a really good sheep enterprise as well."

Mr Matthews said he had grappled with how to sow the whole farm and maintain a mob of ewes, but has decided to set a paddock aside when they start cropping in May.

Merino ewes from SA are bought in and Mr Matthews said they cut 6.5 kilograms of wool and have weaning rates of 120 per cent.

"We'll keep (ewe) numbers at between 400-500 and that'll allow us to sell 500 or more fat lambs," he said.

"Because of the vetch producing so much sheep feed, you've got to utilise that, so trading wethers is what we're going to attempt to do as well. We've managed to get hold of some for about the right price."

There is also change on the cropping horizon, with Mr Matthews ready to move back to traditional wheat varieties after growing Clearfield varieties Kord and Justica to overcome a Brome grass problem.

— QUINTON MCCALLUM

Program switch pays off

BY QUINTON MCCALLUM

A HUGE reduction in fertiliser costs, improved soil health and improved wheat production in marginal areas have been some of the benefits witnessed by Robert Matthews, Meringur, Vic, since switching to biological fertiliser products.

Mr Matthews grows a legume and two types of wheat on 2400 hectares alongside a sheep enterprise in North West Vic, and was driven to Australian Vermiculture products based on economics.

"Being able to get hold of the nutrients you wanted at

the right price became quite difficult," he said.

"The price of fertiliser started to become a major risk to the business."

Developed by Brendon and Del Price as a way of improving soil health and offering disease protection, thus reducing the need for pesticides, AV's biological fertiliser products were trialled by Mr Matthews' agronomist, as well as fellow NW Vic farmer Don Rankin.

Mr Matthews noticed his crops improving each year without putting synthetic fertiliser on.

"I thought I'd have a go at it because I was trying to find a

way to not lose money when we have low yields - when we get 75 millimetres to 100mm of growing season rainfall," he said.

"It became really vital for my business that in those years we didn't lose money. It was about trying to fit your production costs into that low yield."

Mr Matthews said his fertiliser costs had halved, with no noticeable reduction in production.

"You need the confidence that your production is going to be fine, too, and that's a big step when you're going away from something you've been told your whole farm-

ing career," he said.

"I eased my way into it but I quickly became confident that in years where you had low yields, it was going to be equal or better to what we had been doing.

"Once you know that the production is fine then you've basically saved the fertiliser cost."

Mr Matthews said in addition to the fertiliser cost saving, he had noticed an improvement in the biology and nutrient availability of his alkaline soils.

He puts phosphorus and carbon powder products on the seed when sowing, voiding the need for fertiliser

applications later, and then mixes AV's ProGro product with foliar sprays, making for a cheaper and more time-efficient fertiliser application regime.

With Mr Matthews' main aim to reduce the impact of less productive years, he was interested to see how the vermiculture system worked in a favourable season.

He expected his yields to be on par, or better, this season than what he would have achieved before the switch.

"It seems to be making marginal areas more productive but the same amount of product going out seems to work on good areas."

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