

David Fisher is a big arable farmer, even by Mid-Canterbury standards, yet his plough sits idle. He has preached the virtues of no tillage for 40 years, but people don't seem to listen, he tells **Tim Cronshaw**.



Field of dreams: The no-tillage arable farming spread of David and Tracy Fisher. Photos: FAIRFAX

Crop farmer gave up an age-old tool

WHENEVER Australian-born David Fisher is asked why more farmers don't take his lead and rest the plough, he shakes his head. Then, with straight-shooting Ocker humour, out comes the sad and sorry tale of Dr Ignaz Semmelweis.

"I call it the Semmelweis factor. He was a doctor in Austria who discovered they were losing 40 per cent [of mothers] in the obstetric department, because they were not washing their hands in the morgue before delivering babies. He ended up in a mental asylum, and not until later did the medical profession admit that he was right. That explains it all."



Grains of truth: The Fishers have won awards for their farming methods.

Turning his back on the plough might sound like farming heresy, especially when New Zealand has just won the world ploughing title, but the forthright cropping farmer of 20 years in Wakanui is unrepentant.

The benefits are there for all to see, he says. In Australia and Canada, where farmers battle the elements and the growing window is shorter, about 50 per cent of cropping land is plough-free. Some Kiwi farmers leave out the tilling for ryegrass or clover growing, but few arable operations seem to have picked it up fulltime.

Mr Fisher can count on his hand only four growers in the grain bowl of Mid-Canterbury – some of the best arable growing land in the world, with Wakanui at its epicentre – he knows have till-free soils.

No-tillage farming is the growing of crops without disturbing the soil by plough. Crop stubble after the harvest is usually sprayed off with the herbicide glyphosate, or burned occasionally. Surplus organic material, including the roots which form half the plant, is left to naturally die down and build over the years into a fertile growing base.

Then seed is drilled directly into this foundation, and the cycle continues, with worms and microbes left to do the work of the plough and blend this bounty into the soil.

A plough touches The Homestead farm, a 700-hectare cropping property owned by Mr Fisher and his wife Tracy, only when a field needs to be levelled. Otherwise, it's free of farming's age-old icon. A closer examination reveals it has not suffered.

The soils have more organic matter, with less carbon straying into the atmosphere than if they were exposed to the plough's blade, and the ground is less compact from fewer sweeps of the tractor, says Mr Fisher. His tractor lasts 10 times longer than if he ploughed the ground.

Importantly for dryland farming, moisture is retained. In spring or autumn, it is estimated 25 millimetres of water is lost on each plough pass.

The Fishers' profitability line points to their being on to a good thing. The farm recorded a 55 per cent profit from their gross income in the 2008-09 season, with costs at a lowly 45 per cent.

The original homestead block the Fishers bought in 1990 has been direct drilled the last 18 years, and organic material in the soil has risen from 2.5 per cent to between 5.5 per cent and 5.8 per cent.

This doesn't sound like much, but internationally, anyone with 5 per cent has plenty to be happy about.

The couple took ownership of a sheep farm last month and found the plough-free land of 32 years had the same organic level of material as their property which had been continuously cropped. This tells them they have corrected the balance.

"It's an extremely sustainable operation here and I will put it up against anybody's. Fuel is one of my lowest expenses and we are a big operation."

Mr Fisher began to direct drill in 1979 on his family's "broad-acre" (large) cropping and livestock farm near Naracoorte on the border of South Australia and Victoria. It was his idea, and his father, as always, was receptive to innovations that could improve farm production.

Dryland wheat yields averaging 3.5 tonnes a hectare rose to 4.5t/ha, assisted by the technique and new varieties, while irrigated white clover he grew later averaged 600 kilograms a hectare to 700kg/ha.

Having more moisture in the ground helps farms get through droughts, says Mr Fisher.

"I've been farming for the environment all my life, but it has to be profitable as well as very sustainable, which we are.

"Green has a bit of a connotation, but I like the word green and I've got John Deere green. If we are farming the land to the best of our environmental ability and making good profits to afford to carry that on, that's the key."

Cheap land drew the Fishers to Mid-Canterbury in 1989 and they initially bought a farm in Seafield. Removal of subsidies in New Zealand provided a new start for the couple, who were in a good financial position after the wool boom of 1988.

Later, realising there was better land to farm, they sold the 400ha Seafield farm to a dairy farmer and moved to Wakanui and its sugar-frosted topsoils up to 1.5 metres deep in Wakanui silt loams.

The Fishers like to keep the cropping balance simple. In the ground last season went 180ha of white clover for seed, 280ha in wheat of wakanui and oakley

varieties, and 67ha of mainly marrowfat peas.

With wheat prices down, he lifted his clover growing, and this paid off as their best-returning crop. Mr Fisher is now one of the bigger clover growers in the district, producing 200 tonnes in the season just completed.

The sowing of clover and 455ha of autumn-sown wheat began this month, with peas and maybe lentils to go in during spring.

Mrs Fisher says when people are told the land has not been ploughed for the past 18 years, they expect it to be rock hard. The opposite is true and they can direct drill into the soil with little effort or rain because of its organic content.

"On a conventional farm, we might have to do three to four passes of the tractor to get the soil in good enough condition to drill it, whereas ours is ready to go because it is full of worms and organic material."

Above ground, the standing straw would normally be baled, but lack of interest this season for supplementary feeding means it will probably go to the match. Mrs Fisher says there is a lot of misinformation around about the burning of crop residues, and a "good, hot burn" will quickly remove stubble if it is dry and take with it unwanted bugs and disease.

It is better than ploughing, says Mr Fisher.

By running a large arable farm without livestock, the Fishers are free for two winter months to get off the farm and pursue their interest in travel.

In 2001, they bought a stripper header, which, when attached to a combine harvester takes the wheat seed out of the head of a crop and leaves almost everything still standing. This won them the discovery award at the Ballance Farm Environment Awards. They also collected the harvest award in recognition of their efforts to retain carbon in the soil and increase organic matter.

Not long ago, the stripper header allowed them to harvest 595 tonnes of wheat in eight hours. The header also prevents straw and other material from entering the harvester, saving energy, wear and tear on machinery and about 2500 litres of diesel a year.

Motere Angus Centenary

ADVERTISING FEATURE



Farming family: Some members of the Pharazyn family, from left, James and Karla and daughter Anahera, 22 months; Mona Pharazyn with Isaac's son Riley, 3, and Jim Pharazyn with two of the current stud sires, Mt Mable Big Ted, left, and Waitapu Defiance, right. Photos: KATE RIVETT-TAYLOR

New complex marks centenary

Motere Angus has been selling bulls from its Central Hawke's Bay base for 100 years. It is marking the momentous occasion with a huge change in its selling process. *Kate Rivett-Taylor spoke to the Pharazyn family about the centenary and the changes.*

your operation and pay the market price for them.

"Farmers who were buying our bulls 20 years ago are still coming so we have confidence and belief in the quality of our bulls – we're happy to put them up in the public eye. We've had a good summer and autumn – this year's sale bulls have grown out well."

There will also be locals who go to the sale just to have a look but might go home with a purchase.

Most bulls have previously been sold to customers in the Taihape and northern Hawke's Bay areas with a reasonably strong base in Central Hawke's Bay.

"Unit loads go into Taihape and also into the steeper country around Tutira – our bulls have done very well around there," says stud master Jim Pharazyn.

"Some clients have been coming back since 1992. They're still here 18 years later so they must be happy with what they're getting."

The history of the stud isn't as straightforward as some – it has been in the Pharazyn family since its inception but has been kept in a family trust until recently, when Jim Pharazyn, his wife Mona and their sons James and Isaac (and their families) were able to buy out Jim Pharazyn's remaining siblings. The official titles see James

Pharazyn as operations manager, younger brother Isaac as stock manager and father Jim as stud master.

Jim and Mona have "retired" to a cottage on the station but still take an active interest and are actively involved with the running of the property. In fact, they're both pleased their sons have wanted to keep farming and take over.

Motere Station is now 1942 hectares running 7500 breeding ewes, 300 commercial cows and 200 stud cows. Despite its lengthy history, stud numbers have only really been built up since 1990 – a few years after Jim took on the property's management. The stud's aim is to breed strong, hill country angus cattle that are medium framed and fast growing.

Temperament is a big deal and wild cattle are not tolerated, he says.

"Our sire purchases have been from a very varied group of studs as we have been trying to buy, each year, the right bull to fill out our herd."

"Two year heifer calving has been incorporated in all our cattle programme and all females retained must rear a good calf at two. No cow is retained who fails there."



Stud master: Jim Pharazyn of Motere Angus.

Congratulations to the Pharazyn family on the Centenary of Motere Angus

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