



BEN AND KIM WITHAM

"Mundoora", Colleambally, NSW



Mundoora Farming is a family partnership operated by Ben and Kim Witham in conjunction with Mike and Pauline Witham. "Mundoora" was purchased in 1984 with Ben and Kim running the cropping enterprises, while Mike and Pauline run an Angus cattle operation.

Following the acquisition of a neighboring property in 2006, Ben and Kim extended their irrigated and dryland cropping operations to include cotton, a move that has proved highly successful for them, delivering a long-term average of just over 12 bales per hectare.

Kim's father is an irrigation systems specialist, and with his assistance, Ben and Kim began redesigning Mundoora's farm irrigation system in 2006. The meticulously designed and developed irrigation delivery, distribution and application system, has not only achieved significant efficiencies with water use and application, it has also greatly enabled them to address constraints.

In addition to their redesigned farm irrigation plan, Ben and Kim have continued to invest in state-of-the-art technology including automated telemetry, wirelessly operated pumps, automated channel gates and automated pipe through the bank delivery in collaboration with Bidgee Automation. Ben explained, 'We have found that automation has improved our water use efficiency by not over or under watering, and irrigation is changed exactly when its required. Without automation the frequent irrigation changes we make would not be sustainable. We are also able to easily recirculate and reuse all drainage run-off.'

2018 saw a second, high capacity bore installed which has secured water for the second half of the farm making the ability to time watering much easier, through increased flow rate. Watering time has been halved from 12 to six hours.

Ben and Kim grow Roundup Ready® canola seed for Pioneer Seeds and practice a careful crop rotation following the canola with popcorn or maize, then into cotton for one to two years. On another field they rotate corn with canola, then cotton which they have found offers a low risk disease environment and good chemistry options to help reduce weed herbicide resistance.

With the corn and seed crops, the 90cm row spacings have achieved the best results and cotton yields haven't suffered as a result. Ben believes there may be even more potential for higher yield.



They have a continual commitment to soil health and structure, with stubble retention and incorporation being a priority. Ben explained, 'We add chicken litter as often as we can to boost nutrient levels, but have to be careful with timing of application to avoid compaction. Our mixed weed management strategy includes using steel, knockdown and residual herbicides and we try to run less than fifty percent of the area as back to back cotton, if any at all.'

Phosphorus, and potassium are applied upfront. The nitrogen program is a split application program with half nitrogen inputs upfront and the rest supplied as water run in the crop. The aim is for 300-320 units of nitrogen, typically, and this adjusted in crop, based on the seasonal performance and field history. Petiole testing in crop is employed to monitor nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium requirements and supply is adjusted as required.

Mundoora's farm management system revolves around improving some very variable red soil. Stubble is only burnt prior to land forming and when rotating from corn to canola. The farm features red, lighter soils that tend to achieve optimal planting opportunity and allow planting right at the start of the sowing window. They aim to have the first fields in by the end of September to optimise the flowering window. This also provides replant opportunities to soils affected by crusting.

The aim of Ben and Kim's cotton production system is to only plant 50% of the farm, maximising yields through careful management and attention to detail.

They have in place a comprehensive integrated pest management program focused on high fruit retention and beneficial insect maintenance which has resulted in increased yield and quality as well as a reduction in weed herbicide resistance issues.

Registered and working towards myBMP accreditation, Ben and Kim use AGDATA's Phoenix program for enterprise analysis, budgeting and accounting. Ben describes Summit Ag as a critical part of their business, particularly for cotton production. The state of the art irrigation designs were completed by Mike Naylor (Kim's father) from Leeton, while Bidgee Automation tailor designed, supplied and installed all irrigation automation. General farm agronomy advice has been provided by John Ronan of Elders for 17 years and for marketing, Market Ag is a trusted partner.

In 2011 and 2012 Ben and Kim received the Southern Valley Cotton Grower Association's Highest Farm Average Award for the Murrumbidgee Valley and they have been nominated again for the award in 2019. Together they have built an impressive and enviable farming enterprise where their quest for best practice is sure to deliver them similar outstanding results well into the future.

