

Corn and beans just got straighter

Mulgowie Farming Company

Most farmers would like to get more out of their land without compromising its health. Mulgowie Farming Company is on its way to doing that. It has increased the number of vegetable rows from four to six, getting more yield, saving on diesel and ground preparation costs and improving the condition of the soil.



Mulgowie Farming Company is Australian owned and operated and has been growing sweet corn, fresh beans and other vegetables for almost 30 years. It was started by the Emerick family in the Lockyer Valley, Queensland. Now it has 400 staff working 5,000 hectares in Queensland and Victoria. Mulgowie sells direct to supermarkets, agents and markets. The Company has introduced minimum tillage and controlled traffic, to some of its farms. Its fleet of tractors is set up to run down very precise three metre wheel spacing based on GPS coordinates. It is a common practice on broadacre farms but unusual on vegetable properties.

Mulgowie received money from the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country Reef Rescue initiative. The Mulgowie project to convert to controlled traffic and minimum tillage was one of 23 horticulture projects facilitated by natural resource management group NQ Dry Tropics. With its help Mulgowie secured \$40,000 to pay for modifications to machinery and planters to implement controlled traffic and minimum tillage.

They also received \$40,000 for a recycling pit which improves the quality of water leaving the farm by reusing water. Fruit and vegetable representative body Growcom did a risk assessment on their Bowen farm to find out what the Company can do to improve water quality.

Farm manager Andrew Sippel says using minimum tillage has made a big difference to the quality of the soil. "We can get on the ground a lot earlier in the wet season and the ground is getting softer. We also don't have to worry about driving over crop beds." Andrew says. He has also found that the soil holds more moisture because it is not as compacted.

Fertiliser is also being sprayed more accurately since it is not being put in wheel tracks, thus Mulgowie is using less fertiliser in the new production system. Andrew says one of the downsides of using controlled traffic on vegetable paddocks is the difficulty of manoeuvring large machinery around small rows. It takes the Company a third longer to plant an area; however savings are still achieved.

Training staff to get their head around such precise straightness has also been challenging for the Company. Up to 30 people had to be taught to use GPS and get used to this different way of operating.

In the long term Mulgowie wants to avoid digging up the ground at all. "We want to get to the point where we do not have to hoe ground," Andrew said. "We currently hoe beans but try not to hoe corn."

Is it really achievable on such a large scale? Andrew thinks so. The unpredictable tropical weather can throw a spanner in their goals. The Company would also like to keep reducing their fertiliser use by a third more at least over the next two to three years.

Further information contact communications@nqdrytropics.com.au

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