

IDEAS WORTH SPREADING

Words and photographs by Emily Weekes

Despite starting at the beginning of a drought, this farming family's perseverance and openness to change is yielding great results.

When Steve Lanyon left school to work on the family farm, he had no idea one of Australia's worst droughts was on its way. "There's nothing like having no money to make you more efficient," says Steve, wryly. It was 1996. One of Steve's high school teachers remembers thinking Steve was 'bloody mad' at the time; mid-drought, Steve admits he started to wonder that himself. While it didn't rain until 2010, these days, Lanyon Farms is thriving. "We've come a long way," says Steve, "but it's certainly been a battle."

The Lanyon family has been farming in the Boort area, since 1869. A 320-acre property was handed down to Steve's father. By the time Steve left school, the farm had grown to 2,500 acres. Today, Lanyon Farms is made up of 10,000 acres of canola, corn, barley and faba beans. The family's decision to overhaul farming practices during the drought has, in turn, made all the difference. Situated ten kilometres west of Boort in northern Victoria, Lanyon Farms is proof that change can yield great results.



Marshall Multispread with a 3-metre BPW unbraked axle



Carmen Ohler (centre), BPW Transpec's National Product Manager – Agricultural Equipment, with Stephen Freeman (left) from Eastern Spreaders and Steve Lanyon (right), Lanyon Farms.

3-metre wide Marshall Multispread Spreader

Technical information:
BPW agricultural unbraked axle
wheel connection: 10/335/285
axle beam size: 150 x 16 mm
track 2,960 mm

In 2002, Steve introduced Controlled Traffic Farming (CTF) a system that involves creating permanent three-metre wide wheel tracks in a paddock in order to separate crop zone and traffic lanes. This reduces soil compaction traditionally caused by tractors and ensures fewer crops are damaged. "With less overall compaction, our soil holds more water and we grow more grain," says Steve. "We don't get much rain, so we have to conserve every bit of moisture that we can." Moisture probes gather data to a depth of 1.2 metres, which helps determine when a crop may be out of moisture and if there's time to use more fertiliser. Lanyon Farms also switched to a No Till Farming approach, so that a layer of stubble remains on the ground, protecting the soil beneath and ensuring rain seeps more quickly into the earth, rather than pooling on the surface. According to Steve 20-25 percent of Australian farmers already use Controlled Traffic Farming. Within the No Till Farming community, it's closer to 80 percent. In nearby Kerang, Stephen Freeman from Eastern Spreaders has begun to notice an increase in the number of enquiries for three-metre spreaders. Today, at least 25 percent of his orders are for spreaders with this track. Introducing a new system is not without its challenges and being able to rely on well-designed and well-crafted equipment is crucial to any kind of success. Eastern Spreaders is a local dealer specialising in high quality products. Nearly all of its spreaders are equipped with BPW axles, which are known for their long-lasting reliability and sophisticated design. Lanyon Farms' three-metre wide spreader, fitted with BPW axles, traverses the required

wide wheel tracks perfectly. But Steve has customised the spreader even further to distribute variable levels of fertiliser, depending on moisture levels and other data collected on each paddock. This brings us to Steve's greatest adaptation - one that has made him an industry leader in Australia. When the family was forced to find new ways to farm, in less than ideal circumstances, Steve travelled further afield to see how things were grown. In the United States, he discovered Precision Planting, a seed planting technology that drops each individual seed at a precise distance from the last, with the entire process recorded and monitored on an electronic device, like an iPad. While the technology was a \$16,000 investment, it has already produced results. "We now know that every single seed is placed perfectly, which has been amazing," says Steve. "It's made a huge difference to how we grow our corn. Now we can see the location of every seed, work out what's gone wrong and then determine whether it's been a planter or soil type issue." For the past three years, Lanyon Farms has used precision planting to grow its faba beans, with interest now emerging from the industry and neighbouring farmers. As a dealer for Precision Planting, Steve also runs his own company, Spot on Ag, helping farmers to assess how they might adopt this new practice. "The last three years have been fantastic," says Steve. "The farm is really flying." On an iPad, he points to a map of a nearby paddock, showing the variable levels of seed distribution in different colours and explains how they can be matched to a GPS, so that

the spreader can apply more accurate levels of fertiliser. "I've got a little drone that flies across the paddocks and maps out where the crop is growing better and worse," he explains. "Then the spreader can go across the paddock, putting more fertiliser where it's needed and less where it's not." While it's a more holistic and sustainable approach to farming, as Stephen Freeman notes, it does come at a price. Farmers can buy a basic spreader, but would need to customise the machinery to suit their specific needs. For Lanyon Farms, it's money worth spending. "Everything is based on a variable rate," admits Steve, "but that's fantastic for us, because then we know what we can afford to do, given how much fertiliser is needed in different soil conditions." More than eight farms use Precision Planting in Australia, while three are currently underway, led by Steve and with support from the United States. "I meet so many great farmers and we have a beer afterwards and talk about stuff like this, swapping all sorts of tips that we'd never find out otherwise," says Steve. "The three-metre wide tracks aren't rocket science, just common sense, but you'd be surprised how reluctant farmers can be to change their ways." Steve now speaks to No Till Farming association groups and farmers from all over Australia about the benefits of Controlled Traffic Farming and Precision Planting. "It's amazing the responses we've had," he says. "Farmers think our maps are unreal and we've now proved that it creates a more uniform crop!"