

# A case for conservation farming

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**Coonamble, Cassilis & Trangie  
Central West Catchment, NSW**



This month we draw back from the nuts and bolts of conservation farming of past case studies and look at a bigger picture story – the role of women in conservation farming and their contribution to successful farming businesses.

In 1998, academic, Margaret Alston wrote a paper for the Australian Agronomy Conference stating that in Australia women's contributions has been "equally significant and equally ignored" and that the public face of Australian agriculture has been largely "an uncompromisingly male domain".

More than 10 years later, the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation published a report, titled *Revisiting Missed Opportunities – growing women's contribution to agriculture* (Sheridan, A. and Haslam McKenzie, F.), updating a 1998 publication looking at the quantification of women's contributions to the agricultural sector (using 2006 Census data). The difference in the estimated contribution of farm women to the Australian economy between 1996 and 2006 was a growth of 0.8% over 10 years to 49.2%.

The report shows on-farm and off-farm income, household, volunteer and community work. Over the decade there had been increases for men and women across all areas, except the household work contribution dropped by 4 percent for women during this time at the same time their on-farm income contribution rose by 5.4 percent.



**Anne Williams,  
"Magomadine" Coonamble**

**Cropping:** 2,200 hectares  
**Enterprises:** dryland cropping in a winter rotation of wheat/ chickpea/ wheat/ broadleaf (a choice of canola, linseed or safflower). Depending on the season etc we have double cropped using either millet, mungbeans and sunflower. We have about 500 acres that are not cropped that we rotationally graze trade cattle.

Coonamble farmer, **Anne Williams** has been at the forefront of promoting conservation agriculture principles through CANFA, spending several years as chair of the CANFA committee of management.

Anne says she has a defined role in the family farming partnership, which includes her husband, Ray.

"I look after the business side of things as well as the research into better farming practices. I'm also currently undertaking a PhD course in organic amendments in no-till farming."

Anne believes farmers need to be clear about the need to be profitable, as this is the only way in which investments can be made into the environment and resources upon which farming is so heavily reliant.

Women in conservation farming:  
more than silent partners



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"Farming has an extremely exciting future for those prepared to change. We have witnessed a great transformation on our farms not only with increased yields but being able to improve the natural resource base, improving biodiversity and soil health," says Anne.

As someone actively involved in Australian agriculture, Anne believes conservation farming practices are fundamental to the future.

"That is not to say that there are not improvements that can and should be made. Just not cultivating the land is not conservation farming. It is an understanding on how all the interacting pieces fit together to create a fully sustainable farming system.

"Looking after and improving our soil is fundamental, but to that we also need to understand the impacts of insects, birds, trees etcetera.

"Creating wealth through farming allows us to invest in non-profit improvement in this resource base. We have been fortunate to be able to travel overseas every second year since 2000 to study how conservation farming is practiced. We have noticed that all the progressive and passionate farmers can be classed as conservation farmers and they all have a desire to not just create an income but to improve the environment for future generations.

Anne also has very clear ideas about what her sector of the industry is about – a position reached through active involvement both on the farm and off the farm.



"Conservation farming is a system, a goal if you like, not just one farming practice such as direct drilling or not burning crops. I sometimes worry that short-term problems such as weed burdens, high crop residues are overwhelming some farmers and they are reverting to short-term cures, possibly at the expense of long-term goals.

"While the occasional cure may fix the problem, if we then forget about good conservation farming practices we may undo all the good work that we have done up to now. This is a fine line but one we all need to acknowledge and think carefully on," she says.

## **Maree Goodear, "Illogan" Cassilis**

**Cropping:** Cereal cropping  
500ha

**Enterprises:** wheat, barley, canola, lupins and occasionally chickpeas – in rotation; grazing oats (120ha); 180 mixed breed cows + progeny) and up to 300 trade cattle – feedlot operation (use barley, sorghum, oats and lupins); 400 cross-bred ewes. Livestock rotationally grazed.

**Maree Goodear** came to her husband's family property, "Illogan", east of Cassilis, 33 years ago as a newly-wed. Today the family business involves not only Maree and her husband, Robert, but also a son and daughter-in-law.

As for her role, Maree describes herself as the "jack of all trades", but in reality she is the book-keeper and grain marketer of the business, as well as providing general help around the farm.

The family made the decision to change their farming practices 21 years ago in order to be more environmentally and economically sustainable. Maree says the changes have been many and varied for her during this period.

"The book-keeping has changed a lot, there's a lot more involved now. Making sure you're making money out of what you're doing means having to keep up to speed with

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everything," she says.

"We all have our special interests in the business – for Robert it's the cropping and our son's interest is the cattle. But when there's a big decision to make, we all talk about it, but I'm the one who has to work out if the money is there to pay for it!"

Maree said one of the biggest challenges of a family working together is distinguishing the business from the family.

"Mind you, I don't think you really ever do. The business is always there. We do make an effort to visit our other children at times, and we have the grandchildren around to play and sleep over.

"You have to work around the farm program with cropping and livestock needs. Someone really needs to be around at all times, but we take it in turns to have time off."

Having seen a positive turn-around in the farm's resource base over the past two decades, Maree is very optimistic about the future of farming.

"If the parents aren't optimistic, why would the next generation want to be involved? I see a good future in it and being able to feed all our grain to our cattle in the feedlot; we're value-adding there and we see a good future in that. We're now planning on getting the numbers up in the feedlot.

"Conservation farming practices are important to this future. You can't be economically sustainable without looking after your environment. Robert used to say we were losing our soil via the Goulburn and Hunter Rivers with wind and water erosion.

"Now it's all about groundcover. All the soil and moisture stays on the property and we have very little run-off. The only soil we now lose is down our roads and the quality of our soil is so much better."



As a result of the changes to farming practices made by the Goodear family they have been able to purchase more land and increase stock numbers, securing a future for the next generation.

**Kirsty Wettenhall** and her husband Mick have been farming their property 20 kilometres from Trangie on the Macquarie River since they married in 2001. It has been in Kirsty's family for four generations.

"If there is such a thing as a defined role on the farm then I missed out on an official title!

**Kirsty Wettenhall,**  
**"Weemabah" Trangie**

**Cropping:** Potential cropping area of 2,000 ha  
**Enterprises:** 400 cows (including stud, commercial and trading); cotton (amount depends on water allocation); 200 ha seed canola; 150 ha cereals

"I spend a lot of time in the office looking after the business side of things from monthly bills and BAS's to marketing cotton and grain. There is so much work done behind the scenes that I sometimes struggle to see the light! When I can escape the office there are always cattle to move, water to check or pipes to pull. But there's nothing I enjoy more than a day in the cattle yards with Mick.

"In terms of day-to-day farming operations, I am pretty much out of my league. Mick is extremely conscious of the farming systems he uses and we often talk about alternatives to

traditional techniques such as the use of biology or a pasture cropping system suited to our setup. He is an innovative thinker and likes to use me as a sounding board for his ideas," says Kirsty.

Juggling the needs of a young family, who are the priority, with the farm can be demanding.

"When our kids are at school my time is spent between working for the local Landcare group, working on the business and taxiing the kids around. The kids love farm life so we spend quite a bit of time as a family on-farm whether it is with the cattle or changing pipes in the middle of the night!"

Kirsty and Mick were finalists in the 2010 Conservation Farmer of the Year Award regional finalists (Central West). They were recognised for their passion for sustainable food production and restoring the function of their soils.

When asked the question about how important conservation farming practices are to the future of farming, Kirsty echoes what Anne Williams believes regarding the need for the pieces to fit together into a fully sustainable farming system.

"Conservation farming techniques have brought us a long way but I think we have almost exhausted their capacity over the last 20 odd years. We have recognised their inability to build carbon in our soils as a stand-alone system, but couple it with systems that promote soil biology to build our soils' capacity for nutrient cycling and carbon building, then we can value-add to the conservation farming system."

This thought underpins what the Wettenhalls consider to be the biggest issue facing agriculture.

"I have mixed emotions about the future of farming as there is some uncertainty with our farming systems as we move forward into a low carbon economy. Our current methods of farming, albeit an improvement on the past, are still heavily reliant on oil.

"Oil is the elephant in the room that no-one is talking about, history has proven that humans don't act until action is forced upon them. Necessity is the mother of invention and as we've proven in the past farmers are some of the most inventive hence my positive attitude going forwards," says Kirsty.

"I think the days of hauling tonnes of fertilizer from the other side of the world in a boat are numbered - It is just not sustainable going into the future. We need to build resilience in our soils by restoring the natural ecological function that previous methods have severely negated. This won't happen overnight whereas oil price increases will.

"All decisions need to be made with our resource base in mind, by asking the testing question: Are our farming decisions building on our resource base or depleting it?"

### ***Related case studies (<http://canfa.com.au/articles.html>):***

August 2010: Ray & Anne Williams

July 2011: The Wettenhall Family

i. The Regional Institute website/Australian Society of Agronomy (12/3/12) <http://www.regional.org.au/au/asa/1998/plenary/socio-economic/alston.htm>

ii. RIRDC website (12/3/12) <https://rirdc.infoservices.com.au/items/09-083>