

John, Sharon and Brad McDonell

Stony Point, Leeton, NSW

With one of the founding holdings in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA), for the McDonells at Leeton, water and land management have been critical in ensuring their extended one-family ownership for over a century.

John and Sharon, who is a third-generation grower, are joined by their son Brad in the family operation, marking the fourth generation of their family to farm at Stony Point since 1912.

The farm was purchased by Sharon's grandfather, Roy Gavel in 1912; Sharon's father, Graham Gavel, then took over the farm when Roy died suddenly of a heart attack aged 54.

John and Sharon purchased the property in 1988 from Sharon's parents, and in those early years they operated it as a contour farm, growing rice and oats, running sheep, and feed lotting during droughts.

When part of the original property had to be sold, the funds allowed them to form the remaining 162 hectares into a bank-less channel system.

Since then, the McDonells leased and then purchased adjoining properties to consolidate their holdings.

New beginnings

In 2011, Brad joined his parents on the property, and they converted their irrigation to a beds-in-bays layout that allowed them to grow corn.

"Water is the limiting factor," says John. "One of the reasons we grow corn is because of the megalitres per hectare required to grow that crop."

For the McDonells, corn averages water use of around 8 to 8.50 megalitres per hectare (ML/Ha).

"We can pretty well crop whatever we want to crop, whenever we want to crop it – we can change from rice to corn to cotton to winter cereals," says John.

With the success of corn, the McDonells continued land forming with most of the farm now a terraced, bank-less design.

"Our approach to farming and the assurance of water allows us to be dynamic and flexible in the crops we plant." - John McDonell



An automated future

This land forming has led to improved flow rates. From rates of around 6ML per day, to 30ML currently, now the plan with Murrumbidgee Irrigation (MI) is to increase the flow rate to 60ML per day.

Other innovations include rationalisation of water meters, with the reduction from 26 down to four, and working with MI to remove redundant channels and drains.

"We've pretty well got control over when and how much water we want to run," Brad says.

The McDonells next move is to automate their paddocks and connect with the automation on MI's side.

These innovations will also give the McDonells greater flexibility when ordering water, which they do with EASYWATER, and they expect that current notice times of 48 hours will reduce significantly.



Building the family legacy

For the McDonells, modernising their operation and preparing for the future, in partnership with MI, has allowed them to continue building their family legacy. So much so that in 2020, Brad purchased his own property, and John and Sharon re-purchased the part of the original property that they had sold in the early 1990s.

The whole farm is now in two blocks, which gives the McDonells better water efficiency, and the ability to use recycled water.

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"Upgrading our systems with the facilities provided by MI has improved the way we farm and ultimately is an advantage to the profitability and efficiency of the farm." - John McDonell

