



# TAUPO FARMER SAYS HELICROPPING AS GOOD AS DIRECT DRILLING

TAUPO FARMER COLIN ARMER HAS HAD SUCH GREAT SUCCESS WITH HELICROPPING THAT HE IS NOW SPRAYING AND SOWING CROPS ON A NUMBER OF FARMS BY HELICOPTER.

Colin and his wife Dale are large-scale farmers who grow winter brassica crops for their dairy and beef operation.

They began experimenting with helicroping 10 years ago after finding they had pasture they were having trouble developing.

"We thought we would try a few things and we had mixed results with helicroping until we started to fine tune it," Colin says.

"Now we are very confident and the bulk of our cropping is done by helicopter. In total, the chopper does seven passes over any particular piece of land."

Colin and Dale's helicroping programme begins at the end of winter, when glyphosate is sprayed and left for a couple of months. It is then resprayed at the end of October to catch any secondary growth. At the same time, they sow seed and apply DAP fertiliser and slug bait, all via helicopter.

"They are separate applications that all happen within the same day or two," Colin says.

"We do insecticide at the end of October and there's a post-emergent insect spray in mid-November. In late December, there is a side dressing of urea."

Their helicroping is generally done on mixed-contour land. They avoid the practice on steep ground to avoid soil loss.

"We are targeting areas where it is difficult to access 100 percent of the land in a conventional cropping programme," says Colin.

"We are getting superior results to conventional cultivation. We are getting results almost as good as direct drilling, but with direct drilling you are limited to how much of the paddock you can do, as you are with conventional methods.

"With the helicopter we cover areas you couldn't get a tractor over and our crop strike rate is very comparable to direct drilling results.

"The cost comparison is slightly dearer than direct drilling, but it is competitive with conventional cultivation."

Helicroping also offers environmental benefits.

"Soil loss through conventional cultivation is unacceptable. We also protect any wet areas. We fence them in before the crop goes in and we avoid steep areas because of the potential for soil loss."

The Armers employ helicopter contractor Chris Wynn from HeliHire Limited for their helicroping work.

"A big driver for us is health-and-safety risks around tractors and trucks driving over this sort of country. We have one very skilled operator doing everything, as opposed to multiple people with multiple machines doing multiple jobs," Colin says.

"From a farmer's perspective, helicroping is very simple. You do your planning and then it's a couple of emails to send GPS coordinates, and it's done." **RC**

**COLIN ARMER SAYS WITH HELICROPPING HE CAN SOW AREAS HE CAN'T GET TO WITH A TRACTOR AND THE STRIKE RATE IS COMPARABLE TO DIRECT DRILLING.**



◀ crop around March so that it can come away after the winter grazing. The current goal is to determine what technique will achieve this most effectively.

Other issues the SFF project will explore is the role bunds and buffer strips can play in preventing sediment movement, and what plant species can best hold soil structure and help water infiltration.

Ballance science extension manager Ian Tarbotton says the helicopter pilot is an essential part of the process.

"Along with working out exactly how they could use helicroping, the most important thing farmers who are considering the practice can do is get to know their helicopter pilot well in advance and make a plan," Ian says.

"We want to see appropriate use of this exciting technology to manage seasonal forage supply and help New Zealand pastoral agriculture compete and remain sustainable."

Looking ahead the project team is working to:

- Develop a decision tree on what situa-

tions suit this practice and which do not. Risk of sediment loss during the grazing stage is a key consideration.

- Complete some economic analysis regarding helicroping's fit in the farm system.
- Test and verify ways to reduce the risks during the grazing phase.

To keep updated on this work or for further information visit the website: [ballance.co.nz/helicroping](http://ballance.co.nz/helicroping) or contact Murray Lane on [murray.lane@ballance.co.nz](mailto:murray.lane@ballance.co.nz). **RC**