

# Australian guidance systems make their mark

By Mark Casey

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Machinery guidance manufacturer Beeline is finding broadacre grower acceptance for its technology is on the increase.

The company, which started in Brisbane in 1994 and later developed the first commercially available automatic steering for tractors, also has an operation in Fresno the US.

Last November Beeline signed an agreement with Caterpillar to supply components for the Cat Auto-guide satellite navigation system.

The Beeline Navigator was initially used for precision guidance in the cotton industry but has expanded into the broadacre industry in the past couple of years.

Kondinin Group research engineer, Ben White said the move into broadacre applications was a positive development especially as the price has reduced as less precision is required to give plus or minus 20cm accuracy.

"The high initial cost scares some people but when they sit down and do the figures on the potential savings, they find the pay-off can come around reasonably quickly, depending on factors such as the number of acres farmed per year.

"The technology has been out a few years now and the company has addressed some of the problems we had with it initially such as too much cabin-clutter.

"The system is becoming more user friendly — for example the gyro only needs to be re-set 1–2 times a day, whereas previously it was every 30 minutes," he said

David Loughnan has found a Beeline broadacre system has helped do away with two of his pet hates — foam markers and crooked tractor



driving.

David who, with his wife Jane, runs a 3000ha farm near Roma was an early customer for the Beeline system. He upgraded to the Navigator Broadacre system and steering kit in 1999.

"I tell you what, I haven't had a bad tractor driver since. They've all been good," David said.

The farming system, consists of wheat, barley and chickpeas in the winter and sorghum and mung beans in the summer depending on the season.

"We have just converted all our spray gear to follow the same tracks and it's just lovely. It has made life so much easier —no more foam markers with the foam melting on a hot day or disappearing by the time you get back to that row," he said.

The Loughnans estimate the use of a Beeline Navigator has increased efficiency by up to 14 per cent in some areas of their operation.

"With the Navigator we've been able to go hell for leather spraying day and night and because you're not using foam markers and you know exactly where you are up to you can start in one paddock and easily move to the next," David said.

According to an article in Business review Weekly, Beeline expects to have sold its 500th unit by the end of September. Sales are presently divided equally between Australia and overseas but in the next year are expected to be 70 per cent export and 30 per cent local.

Meanwhile others are involved in developing and marketing automated guidance. John Deere for example presented a driverless orchard tractor to the public last year.

Closer to home Toowoomba AgGuide markets the RowGuide GPS based guidance system which is aimed at farmers who want a system at a lower pricing point than the Beeline system which can cost up to \$80,000 for the higher accuracy systems.

A hiring option is available on the RowGuide technology which was developed in conjunction with the National Centre for Engineering in Agriculture.

According to Kim Bremner who farms at Cecil Plains in Queensland, the advantages of having straight rows are greater weed control and no more wide guess rows with weeds missed by the cultivator.

“Lower chemical use means we can come back from a 50 per cent band to as low as a 25 per cent band, saving significant money and less chippers in the field means less frustration over employment and missed weeds,” he said.

“When AgGuide came along with the RowGuide, it meant that we were able to have GPS on hire without having to spend a big heap of money up front. In fact, I have calculated that we are furrowing up for \$2 per acre. RowGuide is very simple to use and requires very little training. This is particularly important when hiring a product that you use maybe once or twice a year.

“I’m looking forward to the day when they put the football and cricket scores on the screen live from the internet,” he added.