

“Low-input Pasture Management and Pasture Cropping” workshop

Kimberley Beattie

On 16 March 2015, 22 people gathered in the wool shed at ‘Silver Springs’ to hear Graeme Hand and Col Seis talk about sustainable low-input grazing management and pasture cropping.

Sustainable low-input grazing management

Graeme is a familiar face to many in this region, as he has held several workshops over the past few years on behalf of Stipa Native Grasses Association.

Graeme’s talk centred around managing stock to ensure the ongoing health of both stock and pasture, without having to rely on inputs. He noted that there is not one ‘rule’ equally applicable to every grazing enterprise, or even paddock, and strongly advocated for graziers to run a set of small trials on their own properties to determine the best combination and length of grazing and rest periods to ensure pasture coverage can be sustained long-term and during hard seasons.

Graeme noted that many rotational grazing practises currently utilised do not allow for a long enough rest period, leading to gradual degradation of pastures over time. Graeme likewise stressed the importance of being aware of the earliest signs of stock health, such as where to look to notice rumen ‘gut fill’, as insufficient gut fill early on, if not addressed by improving access to feed, will lead to eventual decline in stock quality, even if they are in good nick at the time of observation.

He also emphasised the need for a balanced diet for maintaining livestock health, pointing out that too much of a good thing can actually lead to health problems.

Pasture cropping

Col Seis won the 2014 Bob Hawke Landcare Award for his pioneering work in pasture cropping, a management technique he developed after realising that several generations of traditional cropping methods had led to a marked decline in quality and productivity on his family property ‘Winona’.

The basic premise of pasture cropping is that annual crops are sown directly into pastures and grow while the pasture is dormant or has been suppressed by grazing and/or carefully applied selective herbicide use. This enables the same paddock to be utilised for both cropping and pasture, whilst maintaining year-round ground cover to reduce erosion, suppress weeds, and improve soil health.

Col has found that by combining species and retaining perennial ground cover he has improved the quality of his soil, and encouraged the development of mycorrhizal fungal associations, which help plants to access nutrients, thus decreasing his need to rely as heavily on fertiliser applications as he has in the past.

Maintaining a diverse perennial pasture also provides habitat for beneficial insects and spiders, so the long-term benefits of pasture cropping likewise include a decrease in the need for pesticides and herbicides.

Col advocates pasture cropping as a management technique that over time increases the resilience of the property to see through bad seasons and drought, whilst simultaneously reducing the need to spend your life buying and applying chemical inputs (although he does still use some, just in

much smaller quantities these days).

Take home messages from the field day

A big take-home message from the day was the maintenance of species-diverse pastures for improved health and quality of both stock and pastures alike, and establishing trials to learn from your land and livestock the most effective way to manage them.

To learn how to “pasture crop” well we need to understand:

- Our farms should function as ecosystems
- Grassland function
- Soil structure and health
- Grazing management
- Weed management
- Soil nutrients (fertiliser)
- Suitable seeding machinery
- Multi species ‘pasture cropping’
- Vertical stacking of enterprises

If you increase landscape function and perennial diversity it is IMPOSSIBLE not to increase:

- Increase biodiversity
- Improve soil health
- Increase soil carbon
- Lower costs.

Further information

You can find out more about Pasture Cropping at Col’s website: www.pasturecropping.com

Graeme can be contacted via the Stipa Native Grasses Association: www.stipa.com.au



Graeme Hand talking to the group (left), and Col Seis discussing pasture cropping in the field (right)