MEDIA RELEASE

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Pasture cropping saving soils through drought

Scott Proud and Jennifer Schwennesen, organic beef producers near Surat in Queensland, have been using pasture cropping practices to secure the longevity of their property, and rehabilitate and conserve their soil.

For the past five years, Scott and Jennifer have been experimenting with a range of soil management techniques in an attempt to maximise groundcover and water infiltration all year round.

In 2006, the couple were one of 17 farmers approved for funding through the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee's (QMDC) Soil Tender program, which was funded through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, and the Natural Heritage Trust.

This funding has helped Scott and Jennifer improve their pasture cropping methods to further protect their soil from degrading.

QMDC Agricultural Systems Officer, Kathryn Taylor, inspected the project recently. "Scott and Jennifer's property, 'Sydenham', had some hard to manage, hard setting, sodic soils that had really suffered in the past under declining organic matter levels," said Kathryn. "The result was scalded, unproductive paddocks where very little would grow."

Scott and Jennifer's soil tender proposal involved using pasture cropping, where a conventional crop was sowed into standing pastures to increase groundcover and improve organic matter.

The couple said that the soil tender program had helped them to update their pasture cropping planter from a traditional tyned implement to disc openers.

"The new equipment has significantly lessened the soil disturbance when planting, increasing the survival rate of the native pasture," said Jennifer.

Scott and Jennifer, prior to applying for QMDC's soil tender, had experimented with chisel ploughs, and a number of other techniques, but found that the disc planter was the most effective and economic tool to establish pasture crops.

"We found that where we used a chisel plough, or other implements, the soils didn't improve in structure, and plants still struggled to establish," said Scott.

"The disc planter has been able to cover this country easily and quickly, and already we are seeing results as the barley plants are actually growing and improving the groundcover on these once unproductive soils," he said.

"The big advantage is that it costs me $5 to $15 per acre to plant, as opposed to $60 to $70 per acre if I were to deep rip, blade plough or cutter bar the same area," he said.

When this plan was proposed to QMDC, its merits were clear.

"The last few years have seen low summer rainfall patterns, which have not assisted the growth of tropical pasture species at critical times of the year," said Kathryn.

"This decreasing level of groundcover has impacted on the level of rainfall infiltration and overall land condition, and the capacity of the land to respond to rain when it does come."

“Using the new disc planter system they have been able to successfully establish forage barley crops, which are helping to improve groundcover and organic matter levels. With on-going improvements in management, this should lead to positive outcomes for the property’s productivity and for the environment,” she said.

“Barley improves groundcover levels of the soils during winter months because of its vigorous growth in the period, when tropical pasture species are dormant. This growth provides groundcover at critical times of the year, such as when the property experiences September storms, which can lead to extensive erosion and run-off,” said Kathryn.

“And, although QMDC was mainly concerned with this environmental benefit, barley is also a great crop to use as forage for their cattle and meets their needs of being chemical free for organic certification.”

Scott and Jennifer’s project has helped reclaim some of the degraded soils on their property, reducing the risk of erosion and sedimentation into nearby river systems.

Although it will have production benefits for ‘Sydenham’, Scott and Jennifer said that the barley crop will not be harvested, thus was not ‘purely pasture cropping’ in the more commonly accepted way.

“This doesn’t mean that if we have a good year and can harvest a crop, we won’t,” said Scott.

“But we aren’t including the harvest of a crop into our gross margins for the operation.”

“We have a long term vision that no water will be lost as run-off from our property… Every drop of run-off is lost pasture growth potential for us.”

To find out more about rehabilitating degraded soils, or accessing funds to support soil projects, contact on of QMDC’s offices:

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Images

Scott Proud shows QMDC’s Rhonda Toms the equipment he and Jennifer purchased under the Soil Tender project.

‘Sydenham’: Scott and Jennifer have been able to establish solid groundcover, despite difficult soils and reduced rainfall.