Perennials support cattle backgrounding enterprise

Fifteen years ago Craig and Donelle Forsyth were facing mounting problems in their sheep and cropping enterprise in Western Australia’s Northern Agriculture Region (NAR) and knew they had to make some radical changes if they wanted to keep farming.

“In the late 70s and 80s we were into sheep and cropping,” Craig explained, “But the wool price was dropping so in the 90s we reduced our sheep numbers and focused more on cropping. By the end of the 90s that too had run into problems — we were suffering from the effects of waterlogging, diseases and herbicide resistance. “We were going broke and knew we had to do something different.”

An old friend who had been like a mentor to me put a bit of pressure on me to do a course on grazing for profit. He’d done the course himself and although I don’t think he knew how bad our financial situation was, he really encouraged me to do it. Pushed me really. Anyway, I did the course and it got me thinking about changing our farming system.

Now we run a totally different enterprise — a cattle enterprise with mostly perennial pastures. We’re making a profit and it’s a much more sustainable option for us with our soils and climate.

Shifting to perennial pastures

We started planting sub-tropical grasses in the 1990s — mostly Gatton panic and Rhodes grass. About half the farm is under these grasses now. We plant more every year. I figure we’re only up to about 30% of the potential productivity of this place.

We have also put in shrubs — initially we tried tagasaste but we didn’t have the grazing management right. We’ve also put in rhagodia and saltbush.

Something happens when you put perennials in the system — there’s a symbiosis between the perennials and the annuals; I’m not sure exactly what it is but maybe something happens below the surface. Maybe it’s because of the way the perennials pull moisture up from deeper down in the soil, or the fact they shade the surface. But what we find is the annual grasses grow a lot better when they are in with the perennials.

It gets pretty hot here at times and we get harsh, hot easterly winds.

The paddocks used to bake under those conditions. Now the perennials deflect the winds and shade the soil.

Cattle enterprise

We have a small herd of Angus breeding cows, but we mainly concentrate on backgrounding cattle.

We bring cattle down from the pastoral region on an alliance arrangement with the pastoralists. We do some of the marketing for them, but mostly we fatten the cattle. We weigh them on to the property and then weigh them off.

A recent load of little bulls weighed in here at an average of 150 kg each, although some of them were a lot lighter than that.

We’ll bring them up to 240 kg and sell them straight onto a boat for the export market. We are paid on a per kilogram weight-gain.
basis, while the pastoralists still maintain ownership of the animals.

Last year we brought about 3000 cattle down from the pastoral regions. I reckon by 2015 we’ll be capable of backgrounding 4000 cattle and by 2020 we should be looking at six or seven thousand or more.

We bring the cattle in from May onwards and sometimes right up until September.

Sometimes when the cattle come in from the pastoral regions during winter, it’s pretty cold here and the cattle simply aren’t used to it. You can get a cold wind blowing and a real chill in the air. If they’re out in the open, they’ll hunch right down against the wind. But the shrubs give them shelter. They’ll get in behind the shrubs and shelter there.

By October, we’re looking to reduce the numbers again. By December, we get the numbers to about 1000 and as low as 800 by autumn, which is our hardest time in terms of feed.

What we are trying to do is to match the feed demand to the feed supply.

Grazing management

We rotationally graze the paddocks. It’s a fairly simple system — we try to make it idiot-proof. The aim is to rest the paddocks a few times during the year. During winter, when the grass is growing, those rest periods may only be about a month long. Over summer, we sometimes need to rely more on the perennials and can’t rest them as much. But during autumn, we try to rest paddocks for three months.

It’s taken us a while and a bit of trial and error to get the management and grazing right. Initially, the inter-rows between our shrubs were as narrow as our minds. We’ve had to broaden both. Now we plant shrub rows about 20 m apart. The inter-row pasture is important for the pasture diversity.

In one 30 ha paddock we have perennial grasses at either end, then in the middle we have rows of rhagodia about 20 m apart, with grasses in between the rows. We set it up that way because of the soils in that particular paddock and it works well. We put up to 400 cattle into a paddock like that for about one week in winter. During summer, we might put 100 steers in there for four weeks.

With a bit of summer rain, the perennial grasses keep growing. Before, when we relied on annual pastures, if we got summer rain, we’d be dropping our bottom lip and whinging about it. Now I say, bring it on! Summer rain and sunshine make the perennials grow. Our growing season starts on 1 January and ends on 31 December.

If we’d kept doing what we were doing 15 years ago, we’d be unemployed now. We certainly wouldn’t still be on the farm. We still have some debt, but we also have income. I think we’re sustainable now. Farming is a business, but it’s also a lifestyle, and when it’s going well it’s a pretty damn good lifestyle. We still have that lifestyle.”

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We can help them. Relocating cattle from the rangelands to agricultural regions can be a big change for the animals, but they can manage remarkably well if given the chance. Providing familiar food on arrival is one approach, and here the role of shrubs could benefit animals from pastoral shrublands. “Educated peer” animals also can be used to show new arrivals the lay of the land. Research at Craig’s place (led by Dean Thomas) showed the grazing activity of pastoral-derived cattle could be increased by at least 10% during the first six weeks of arriving at Craig’s farm, simply by placing the animals with experienced animals.

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Incorporating perennial grasses and shrubs into their farming enterprise (above) has enabled the Forsyths to create a profitable cattle backgrounding enterprise (Photos: Craig and Danielle Forsyth)