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Producer Research Support

Hill country pastures lift carrying capacity

Nowendoc Landcare Group



The project

Nowendoc is on the Great Dividing Range in the upper reaches of the Manning River catchment area in NSW. It is a distinct, small, isolated rural community, surrounded by state forests, national parks and wilderness areas. The terrain ranges from rich basalt plateaus to steep slopes and valleys. Beef cattle is the major enterprise in the area.

The project allowed the Nowendoc Landcare Group to conduct trials to see if they could find economically viable methods of establishing pasture to restore productivity and meet changing market requirements.

Objective

Demonstrate that beef cattle producers in the Upper Manning catchment can restore productivity, enabling them to meet changing market requirements, by using methods of pasture establishment, shown by trials to be economically viable in this difficult terrain.

What was done

The trial consisted of one control plot and five improved pasture types. Each of these plots was situated on steep terrain common to the area and upland river catchments.

Once established, two cattle grazing trials were held on these plots.

"These trials have resulted in many ongoing benefits to beef cattle producers in the Nowendoc area and others with similar country in different areas," said Morgan

Keating, Emu Tops, Nowendoc. "There have been some on-going changes to farm practices as direct and indirect results of the trials."

Country improved since the commencement of the trials is already turning off more prime cattle.

He said if more producers improved more country in a similar manner, the increase in the number of stock to local abattoirs would increase employment, boost rural supply businesses and stock transport companies.

What happened?

The trials have proved the potential of this type of country and changed its value. The improved pastures have enabled producers to meet current market requirements with stock grazed on what was previously thought of as second rate country.

The main benefit of the trials was very basic; in that the group found it was better to do something than do nothing.

No action resulted in continuing land degradation, increases in weeds, timber regrowth, poor pasture quality and negative productivity.

New pasture establishment techniques on difficult hill country in the Nowendoc area of NSW have shown the way to improved stocking rates and given local producers the ability to turn off prime steers, thereby resurrecting employment and business opportunities for the entire community.

The Nowendoc community in NSW is not alone in suffering the effects of the decline in rural areas generally — loss of services, rural employment, closure of two sawmills and an aging population.

This Producer Research Support project, begun in 1994, helped spark a changed mindset and handed local producers the knowledge to more effectively improve pastures, productivity and profitability.

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Key points

- If more producers improved more country in a similar manner, the increase in the number of stock to local abattoirs would increase employment, boost rural supply businesses and stock transport companies.
- The trials gave them the impetus to try something different and enabled them to avoid what could have been costly mistakes. Producers have since conducted their own trials on much larger areas to see what best suits their situation.

Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

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The use of a helicopter for spraying and aerial seeding was a first in the area and found to be very successful on the steep terrain.

The group found that it was quick and cost effective and could cover areas not accessible by tractors. The producers on whose property the trials were conducted, adjoining producers and several others in the district have used helicopters for weed control, seeding or both since the trials.

When using the helicopter neighbours have co-operated, lowering the costs.

Some producers had used some of the techniques of pasture establishment from the trials and adapted them to suit their own equipment, abilities and budget.

The trials gave them the impetus to try something different and enabled them to avoid what could have been costly mistakes.

A couple of producers have since conducted their own trials on much larger areas to see what best suits their situation.

The trials hastened the introduction of the use of glyphosate spraying as an alternative to ploughing.

Most producers in the district now use glyphosate instead of ploughing for their ground preparation. A boom spray behind a tractor is used on appropriate country and a helicopter on steeper areas.

"They have found this to be cost effective when taking their own time into account."

Discussion

The type of country used in the trials has traditionally been used for store bullock production. The store bullock market has virtually disappeared.

A group member said that by establishing pasture, new market options were available. Two tooth steers in prime condition could now be turned off.

Increased productivity by grazing more higher valued cattle for a much shorter time that met market specifications was the result.

A comparison of the results from the different pasture mixes gave producers a guide to what types of pasture improvements would be most suited to the conditions on their properties.

Members were all involved in assessing and reporting on aspects of the trials, record keeping, rainfall, cattle weights and pasture analysis. Group members now know what is involved in trialing ways to develop country to optimise beef production. Group members felt that a detailed documentation of all aspects of the trials would provide ideas and options to the wider grazing community.

He said the planned outcomes from the trial were not realised and many questions in relation to nutritional management needed to be investigated in depth.

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"Long term trials conducted by departmental staff over long periods of time are needed to gain any real conclusions."

Mr McKellar said the group planned to continue with the project with monthly weighings, and faecal and pasture samples being assessed, in order to use this information to accurately determine the timing and type of supplements needed to keep their cattle growing to their satisfaction.

The group's objective continues to be a 0.5kg/day improvement in animal performance.

MLA also recommends **BeefPlan**

BeefPlan is a non-traditional approach to learning. Groups of like-minded beef producers, work together as a management team to focus on property management. Importantly the learning agenda is set and controlled by the group.

Contact Steve Banney - Project Coordinator

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