

94/N03



Producer Research Support

Saltbush Grazing Group



The project

There is a long-held belief, at least in those parts of Australia where saltbush is used for grazing, that it not only provides quality feed in dry periods but it also produces high quality meat.

But there has been a distinct lack of knowledge of the value of old man saltbush as forage for livestock.

Saltbush Meat Productivity and Quality Trial run by the Saltbush Grazing Group set out to determine the value of old man saltbush as a forage shrub.

Objectives

Evaluate the place of old man saltbush as a forage shrub to:

1. Improve the productivity of the landscape for grazing;
2. Improve the quality of meat, in tenderness, low fat and taste, from both sheep and cattle; and
3. Prove the value of saltbush for high productivity in feed-short periods.

What was done

The project included a cattle feeding trial consisting of the following four treatments.

1. Saltbush grazing only;
2. Saltbush grazing supplemented with grain;
3. Saltbush grazing followed by green-feed crop grazing; and
4. Native pasture grazing (control group).

A sheep feeding trial with similar treatments to those used in the cattle trial was also planned.

Trial animals would be weighed at the start of the trial and every two weeks during its duration. At the completion of the trials all trial animals would be sent to a local abattoir for slaughter. The carcasses of the trial cattle were to be evaluated by NSW Agriculture staff.

Due to the very dry conditions in the Narromine area in 1994 the sheep feeding trial did not proceed.

A sample of the meat produced in the cattle trial was assessed by a butcher, a meat scientist from NSW Agriculture, and by a group of Narromine people at a taste testing.

A sheep feeding trial was conducted during 1997. This confirmed that, during dry periods especially, saltbush gives better liveweight gains and better quality meat than native pastures. Using a grain supplement with the saltbush increased livestock weight gains. This occurs because of the high protein level of the saltbush. Saltbush on its own does not provide an appropriate balance of carbohydrate and protein for growing animals.

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.

Contact Gerald Martin -
Producer Research Support Coordinator.

Tel 08 8556 2900 or
producersupport@mla.com.au

MLA also recommends

EDGENetwork

EDGENetwork offers practical field-based workshops to improve productivity and profitability for the long-term.

Workshops cover breeding, nutrition, grazing management, marketing and selling.

Call MLA on 1800 993 343 or
www.edgenetwork.com.au

Meat & Livestock Australia

Level 1, 165 Walker Street
North Sydney NSW 2060

Tel 02 9463 9333

Fax 02 9463 9393

Free Phone 1800 023 100 (Australia only)

www.mla.com.au

What happened?

There were two main outcomes of the project. Members of the group now have a clearer idea of how to utilise old man saltbush in conjunction with other feed supplies. This increased understanding of how to use the bush has resulted in an increase in the areas planted.

Secondly, the trial verified the better eating quality of meat produced on old man saltbush. This outcome has resulted in the group conducting research for the development of a plan to market 'Saltbush Lamb'. This activity is being undertaken with the assistance of a consultant funded by a State-based agency.

Establishment costs of old man saltbush (including seedbed preparation, seedlings, planting costs and post-planting weed control) were estimated at \$800/ha. Once the saltbush has been established there should be no continuing costs. Returns from grazing - based on two grazings each year and an agistment rate equivalent to \$3 per cow and calf per week - was estimated at \$360/ha. Using this figure the annual return on the investment in establishing saltbush was 45%.

The other advantages claimed for saltbush are that it reduces the need for handfeeding during droughts and the amount of wind erosion likely to occur during dry periods.

Discussion

Since the producer research support project was conducted some group members have increased their plantings of saltbush to between 30 and 50 per cent of their properties. In the Narromine area this amounts to about 80 producers planting saltbush plantations for grazing. However, many producers in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia who have planted saltbush for grazing maintain some contact with the Narromine group.

Next steps

The group is serviced by Grazing Management Systems, a consultancy firm based at Narromine. Meetings take the form of seminars to discuss grazing management issues. Various activities have been undertaken as a follow-up this project.

A plan to market 'Saltbush Lamb' is under development. Market research indicates that Saltbush Lamb would be well received by the high value end of the lamb market provided it can be supplied year round. This means further increasing saltbush plantings.

The plan is to establish a marshalling property in central NSW from which lambs could be sent to a local abattoir for processing. It may be another five years before 'Saltbush Lamb' is being regularly supplied.