

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE THE PROOF IS IN THE PRODUCE

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Facilitator Tim Ackroyd with landholder Simon Burgess, participant in the Small Landholders Property Management Program.

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More producers are looking at sustainable agriculture as a way of improving quality and yield of their produce for the long term and as a means of creating a marketable point of difference for their product. For southern Tasmania's producers, the proof of sustainable agriculture is in the produce.

NRM South has been running trials with farmers and property managers throughout the region from the Derwent Valley, to the Huon, the east coast and greater Hobart area. The results speak for themselves.

Huon property owner Simon Burgess was keen to explore the options available to improve his farm returns. On his 87 hectare beef and apple farm in the Huon Valley, Simon noticed the loss of grass on the property as native animal numbers increased. This meant less grass for cattle, the need to purchase additional feed and a significant impact on the viability of the farm.

"In 2010 we had no grass to feed the cows and they were in poor health and we had halved our stocking rate of breeding cows. We either had to start making money or stop farming. I felt the weight of this decision on my shoulders, having to decide the future of the farm that has been in my family for four generations.

"On a wet winter's day, I was out in the pouring rain feeding silage to the cows. It was a miserable day and the cows were walking all over the silage and compacting it into the ground. I thought to myself I am wasting my time here."

Simon made a decision to look at what options were available. One thing led to another, and Simon attended some farm workshops put on by the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment and NRM South's Regional Landcare Facilitator. The first workshop focused on native mammal browsing control, and the second on soil health and pasture management.

Simon then took part in a fencing trial, which protected his native grasses and provided feed throughout the year for cattle. He later took part in a planned grazing trial, which has now become a way of operating the farm.

The cattle now run on 16 main paddocks which are strip-grazed individually with temporary electric fencing, with smaller paddocks of typically 1-2 hectares grazed for around 4-5 days. Each area grazed is allowed to recover for 120-150 days before stock are put back in.

The focus on improving their pastures and soils through planned grazing has resulted in significant productivity gains as well as reduction in costs. The farm now

has more grass and the stocking rate has been increased to some 60 breeding cows. Additionally, they have saved money annually by not needing to fertilise the majority of their paddocks through this process.

"We are now achieving the financial outcomes we originally set out to achieve. It's only taken us two or three years to make our money back and for the first time in years we are making money on the cows."

The Burgess' story indicates what's possible by thinking outside the square. This is just one example of how to make sustainable farming work for producers. Some Tasmanian farmers are exploiting the increased marketability of a product that is produced sustainably. Consumers have started to seek food that can demonstrate its journey from paddock to plate.

For some, this marketability is already working. Ultimately the goal is to enable farmers, no matter their size, to produce high-quality and high-value produce now and in the future.

