

Native Pastures Increase Profits on Victorian Farm

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Key points

- Native grasses developed on grazing property
- Provided the ability to double stocking rates
- Produces secondary benefits of lower fertilizer and labour costs

Graziers Tom and Kate Calvert have achieved the holy grail of increased productivity, lower costs and a healthier environment through the use of native Australian pastures on their property, Terrinallum South, at Darlington in the Western Districts of Victoria.

"Back in 1992 we were grazing about a 1 to 1.5 dry sheep equivalent per acre, but through actively grazing parts of the property covered in native grasses, we are getting 2.5dse/ac easily," Mr Calvert said.

The Calvert's run about 10,000 Merino sheep on their 1,900 hectare property, using a rotational grazing system to produce the most meat and wool from their combination of improved perennial and native pastures.

Terrinallum South is hosting one of three Victorian native grassland grazing trials being supported by Grain & Graze, the Victorian Volcanic Plains group, and the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Mr Calvert said he "discovered" the benefits of grazing native pastures in 1994, when a small section of the property was fenced off and not grazed because he thought the native vegetation was "significant".

"But pretty soon that paddock had become virtually a mono-culture of Kangaroo grass, and the value of that area from a conservation perspective had been eroded," he said.

"By contrast, the native pastures that had been grazed were looking great - with a wide range of native species - and to top this off they were supporting productive sheep. It was clear there were actual benefits from the parts of the property that were native grasses, but that had also been grazed."

Terrinallum South is divided into a range of 10 to 12 hectare paddocks, where the Calverts run their flock in 2,000 to 3,000 head mobs. The only exception is during spring lambing, when the mobs are broken into much smaller groups. They target a 60 day grazing rotation, with intense grazing of each paddock for an average of 3 days, followed by a break of nearly two months.

"We are seeing some real benefits to the biodiversity on the native grass paddocks. We have found up to 60 native species of vegetation on the grazed paddocks."

The predominant grasses on the native pastures include Kangaroo grass, Wallaby grass and common wheat grass, as well as a selection of other species that are native to the Basalt Plains region. The 250 hectare native pasture block cost about \$69 per hectare to fence and water so that it could be run under a rotational grazing system.

"It has been a pretty good return on investment in wire and water (establishing the rotational grazing system), which I think is due to resting the soil and the land," Mr Calvert said.

Last year's wool clip averaged 17.8 microns, but the Calvert's are aiming for a long-term average of about 19m, with heavier carcass weights for their breeding ewes. The non-native pasture base is a permanent pasture mix of ryegrass, phalaris and clover.

"What we are finding is that the annuals don't respond well to the rotational grazing, and therefore are gradually grazed from the native pastures naturally. We have undertaken to get rid of the thistles and spot-spray any of the phalaris that emerges in the native pastures as well," Mr Calvert said.

"All this means the native pastures have enabled us to increase productivity, and the condition of the sheep is as good as it has ever been."

Grain & Graze is a joint initiative of Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI), the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) and Land & Water Australia (LWA).