Getting the most out of existing saltbush plantations

If saltbush plants are only lightly grazed, they can grow beyond grazing height for sheep. Branches can also grow into one another, creating impenetrable hedges. There are a range of approaches that can be used to improve the productivity of overgrown saltbush stands.

Pruning

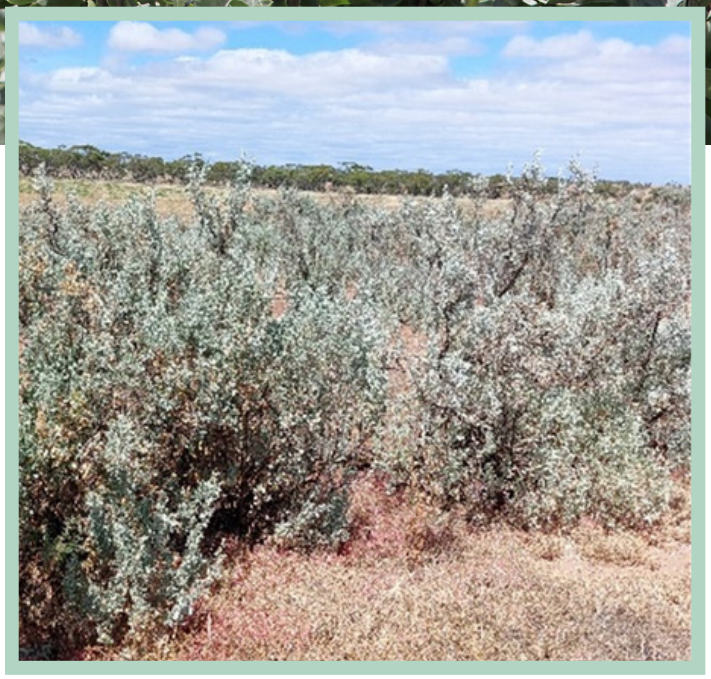
Overgrown saltbush plants can be successfully pruned back to an ideal size to stimulate new growth accessible to sheep. Farmers have experimented with various methods including rolling, slashing and cutting with either circular or 'double' saws or flail mowers. Plants can be cut back to as low as 15 cm without affecting survival. Plant deaths mostly occur when the crown of old man saltbush is severely broken, which mostly occurs after slashing or rolling.

Removing rows

Shrubs planted too densely are less productive due to increased competition between shrubs. This situation also occurs when volunteer saltbush plants grow in the inter-row space. Removing a proportion of the shrubs from overgrown stands can offer the following benefits:

- Better shrub growth through reduced competition
- Reduced habitat for rabbit and foxes
- Better machinery or vehicle access for companion pasture planting or management
- Improved mustering

When considering how many plants or rows to remove, gaps should be wide enough to allow vehicle access for mustering and management of pasture. It is generally advised to leave shrubs in at least double rows to minimises the chance of gaps forming when a plant dies, creating an erosion risk. It is best to keep paddocks small enough to allow high grazing pressure, otherwise shrubs can be poorly utilised.



Old Man Saltbush which is left ungrazed becomes overly tall and woody.

Companion pasture

By creating more room between saltbush plants, inter-row pasture can be better managed. In most situations, this companion pasture will be the most productive component of a saltbush system. Research data and practical experience has shown that shrubs actually increase pasture production in the inter-row. This is particularly the case when saltbush has been planted on salt-affected land. Over time, as more water is used and salts are washed back down the profile, grasses and legumes can be sown between saltbush rows, or volunteer pasture can be manipulated through herbicide application.

Getting the most out of existing saltbush plantations

Saltbush plantings can become too dense if too many volunteer plants grow in the inter-row. Farmers can consider removing rows to allow the establishment of companion pasture.

Well managed Eyres Green saltbush with annual ryegrass growing in the inter-row.

Improving grazing management

To get the best out of forage shrubs, it is important to graze at least annually, and in years of plentiful growth twice a year. Stocking densities need to be high to promote even grazing, which means shrubs should be fenced and paddocks kept small. Short, sharp 'crash' grazing keeps shrubs short and productive. Grazing with cattle and older experienced sheep to 'finish up' shrubs which have grown out of reach of smaller animals is also a useful option if available.

Set stocking at a low density for long periods is not ideal as it allows selective grazing of the pasture and increases the risk of retarding regrowth. Set stocking can deplete shrub resources and eventually kill plants.

Maintaining a good supply of fresh water is critical. Old Man Saltbush has a high salt content, and livestock will quickly reduce feed intake if water is unavailable or the water itself has a high salt content.

If Old Man Saltbush plantings are being grazed with limited complementary pasture, the high salt load does limit feed intake. If high growth rates are the target, or pregnant ewes are grazing the shrubs, supplementary feeding to provide additional metabolisable energy is required (e.g., good quality hay, grain, or companion pasture). As with any feeding system, it is important to monitor the liveweight and/or condition score of animals, and adjust feed as required.

Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry | Future Drought Fund | mallee catchment management authority | Mallee Sustainable Farming | ROBUST Mallee Farming Systems Sustainable, Innovative and Profitable

This project is supported by the Mallee Catchment Management Authority, through funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund.