

Reclaiming a Seep and Adding Feed With Saltbush

SNAPSHOT

Farmer name: Trevor 'Blue' Wyatt

Location: Murrayville, Vic

Farm size: 6000 ha

Enterprise: Cropping (1600 ha/yr) and sheep

Average rainfall: 250 mm

Treatment: Saltbush sown on a Mallee seep

INTRODUCTION



When the Wyatt brothers Trevor (Blue) and Neville took over the farm near Murrayville in Victoria, a large Mallee seep, about 10 acres in size, was scalding a patch of land.

Blue says, "at the time you couldn't see any salt on the surface, but nothing would grow." Because the seep couldn't support any crop growth to use excess water, the scald was slowly getting worse. It was an unusable, unproductive land.



Saltbush growing in the seep area

Key messages

- Planting saltbush is a useful approach to reclaiming saline land/mallee seeps and providing fodder and shelter for sheep.
- What was a bare patch of salt-affected land 30 years ago is now completely covered with salt bush and grass. Blue successfully turned the seep from a 'useless patch of ground' into an asset.

THE SOLUTION



In the late 1990's, Blue heard that planting saltbush was one way to help manage a seep. Saltbush is drought and salt tolerant and is a good forage shrub to fill feed gaps, as well as providing shelter for stock, particularly lambing ewes.

Blue mounded up the soil before planting the saltbush, which may have helped it cope as saltbush does not like waterlogging. "I just went in with a seeder, which had a big ripper on it, and it mounded the dirt into a mound, and the seed was sown on top and then just pressed in with a press wheel," he said. He sowed the saltbush along with tall wheatgrass, a species known to tolerate salinity well.

The plants were sown in late winter then fenced off from the sheep. With the late planting Blue was concerned that there wouldn't be enough moisture to keep the saltbush alive. However, over the next two years enough germinated and survived for the patch to establish. The wheatgrass did not cope as well and died after a couple of years.

When the saltbush was around 40-45 cm high, Blue let the sheep in for some carefully managed grazing, making sure they didn't overgraze and kill the plants. He then took them out and waited another 6 months for the saltbush to recover. Blue said, "since then, I've just left the gate open and they come in whenever they please."

Blue tried sowing lucerne a few years after the saltbush established, but it did not grow well. Annual grasses now grow between the saltbush shrubs.



The seep in 2009



The seep in 2023



Saltbush in the seep in the distance

It took about 15 years of saltbush growth for the seep to dry up, with the west end of the seep taking longer to dry out. 30 years ago, you couldn't drive on the seep. According to Blue, it would take a few inches of rain to make trafficability an issue today.

Nowadays, the saltbush is an asset, which came in handy during the dry years from 2017-2019. The saltbush survived the drought. "The sheep ate it down until there were hardly any leaves left, then they were locked out, but the saltbush survived," said Blue.

TEACHING THE SHEEP



Saltbush is a useful feed filler, but sheep sometimes need convincing to try it, especially if there are other feed sources around. To get the sheep to have a taste, Blue initially locked them in with the saltbush.

“It seems like once some of the older ones know what they’re doing they teach the young ones pretty quickly. They don’t come in here if there’s plenty of other green around, but when it gets a bit dry or we run out of green, they’ll come in here,” he said.

The sheep also use the saltbush for protection. “When the ewes are lambing they head to the patch with their lambs, and when it’s cold and wet they bring their lambs in,” said Blue.

NEXT STEPS



Some of the shrubs have grown too big to be readily grazed by sheep, and the sheep can’t reach the tops. Blue is experimenting with ways to trim the shrubs and plans on making a slasher to do the job.



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PROJECT INFO



Managing consultant: Nick Paltridge
Thanks to Blue Wyatt for sharing your story.

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