

Jenny Robertson, woolgrower, Bengworden

My husband Rick and I have a 2,300 acre sheep and cropping farm at Bengworden, near Bairnsdale. But 22 months ago we decided to really change the way we farmed. We wanted to reduce our risk, manage stocking rates to rainfall, improve our profitability and to get some help along the way.

This change has been possible because we didn't do it alone, we employed a company whose mission is to balance people, profits and environment.

To give you a bit of a picture, Rick has always been very serious about farming and had initially done Farm Management at Glenormiston years ago and was always trying to keep abreast of any new developments that he could adopt.

But ever since we had taken over the business we faced numerous challenges, such as poor seasons, low commodity prices and more recently experienced a serious crop failure.

Our balance sheet was being eroded; Rick was worn out from feeding out and trying to keep our heads above water. Our production driven system was obviously not working. Everything was stressed, paddocks, stock and people!!

He felt he had failed trying so hard to succeed in these challenging times.

Sound familiar?

The decision to change came about one Sunday in November 2008 after our three girls were at home watching Landline with us, (this was particularly unusual!)

They had a program about Nigel Kerin, who had just won the NSW farmer of the year award.

Nigel was interviewed about his family's approach to farming sustainably with a much-improved bottom line; the farm looked healthy and productive. It was a really inspiring story.

The turnaround in their business came about five years previously after attending a holistic farm management course and engaging the services of Principle Focus.

This all made such wonderful commonsense to me and amazingly all the girls turned to Rick and said 'Dad, why don't you do this?'

When the girls actually challenged him, he felt he had nothing to lose, so he agreed to give it a go.

We contacted Principle Focus and found out what sort of commitment was involved. We would have four quarterly meetings with a consultant, at our place or somewhere that was agreed.

To start, we had our first meeting at home. Jim arrived and we had a full day going through everything. We went around the farm, we looked at the general layout of the property and assessed how the stock looked, what sort of pastures we had and how much ground cover there was. We went over all the figures, stocking rates and rainfall. We developed a grazing chart which matched stocking rates with rainfall.

Rick and I had to answer a few questions that involved being honest, such as if you were happy with how things were, if we felt our communication was up to speed.

If we scored lower than seven we had to discuss why. This was all very new to us!

When we went through our goals, these also included taking holidays and fixing up the house and where we wanted to be in the future.

Jim helped us to develop a plan of action that identified areas we needed to work on, options that were available to us and to develop achievable goals and action plans.

It has been invaluable to have a third-party, independent person to bounce ideas around with and to quickly crunch the numbers to aid your decision making.

Rick has been reticent at times to what we would do in our quarterly meetings, but amazingly he comes away each time saying 'that was great' and that he has been challenged.

He feels that these are realistic and obtainable goals and it has given him a much greater sense of control over everything, which is fantastic.

Rick and I now have monthly meetings where we go for a farm tour together, look at our cash flow and check what needs to be done. It is a great time to concentrate on where we are going and helps us keep on track.

Our philosophy has been to adopt a lower risk, more sustainable system of managing livestock, land and people.

We had been pushing our production levels too hard, and our landscape and stock weren't coping. Our percentage ground cover was compromised. We had to start managing our stocking rates according to how much rain fell. We have had to undertake a much more vigilant approach to rotational grazing, by mobbing up; by this I mean instead of lots of little mobs, we put them into mobs of up to 2000 ewes and rotate them around the farm, in much smaller paddocks.

The idea is to then to give each paddock a much longer rest period. You use the animals to graze more evenly and to knock down dry grasses, creating a mulch layer. The grass is then able to recover more quickly with these longer rest periods and grows more strongly. Also you are also adding humus to the soil, improving its water-holding capacity. So we actually are making the best use of what rain we do get.

This system has meant no additional hand feeding is needed now.

Another very valuable tool we use to help us regenerate our farm more quickly has been to use pasture cropping, which we have found to be an excellent way to get all-year-round ground cover and provide very valuable stock fodder during winter. Plus it renovates the paddock at the same time.

It is lower risk and, if we don't get the rain to kick it along, we still have ground cover.

To pasture crop you direct-drill winter-active cereals into winter-dormant /summer-active perennial pasture after the application of selective herbicide.

The herbicide is used to take out annual weeds, but not harm desirable perennial pasture.

These crops are used as standing green feed during winter. We then lock up the paddock for four months, to allow it to grow and produce a seed head; we then reintroduce the stock in summer.

It really is a bit like a standing feed lot. A major benefit of this is the stock have plenty of feed ahead of them, they knock down the parts of the crop and put approximately six tonnes of dry matter per hectare onto the surface of the ground while feeding.

The grain that is not eaten is trampled onto the ground and provides for a second crop after a summer storm. The ground cover in one of our paddocks went from 50% to 95% in the last 10 months. We use mostly use oats – siai and lampton.

To conclude, after 22 months and another tough season our finances have effectively turned around from a loss to a profit.

We feel much more in control of our future for the first time since we started farming!

The ground cover has improved substantially, our animal health costs have been reduced by 60%, our wool cuts have gone from 5.2 to 6.2 kg average per head and the tensile strength has improved from 32 newtons to 42 newtons.

Also our lambing percentage has improved from 74% to 92% and Rick now has time to himself. So much so that our drought-tolerant Mediterranean-style garden has expanded and new creative structures keep appearing!

By changing the way we farm we are well on the way to create a more resilient farming system in a low-rainfall environment. We have reduced our risk and, with the help of experienced consultants who share our philosophies, we feel there is fantastic future for farming!