

Heather Smith, beef, sheep and goat farmer, Tambo Crossing

Everyone's talking about climate change, drought, floods, fire and unpredictable weather patterns, all resulting in unreliable income, tension, unviable farming and the resulting damage to the environment.

As I have only been farming for about 25 years, I have to admit that all of these factors have been an integral part of my life since marrying a farmer. I just thought this was normal ... from what to grow, where to grow, how to grow, to when to grow. Everything has been so unpredictable.

The challenges I would like to talk about are fire recovery, pasture improvement, weed control, vermin control, water, and finally education to meet these challenges.

Background

I was a city girl who married a dairy farmer, actually here in Drouin South. We moved from Gippsland to the Western District for 11 years, from Woolsthorpe to Mortlake when in the Western district, and then back to East Gippsland. Most of these moves have been an attempt to survive, either by becoming bigger, reducing debt or becoming more viable. With these changes in location came changes to what we farm.

We are now on 1600 acres in the hills, surrounded by State Forest. We have been here for 10 years and are farming 300 breeding Boer goats, 300 breeding Dohne ewes and have 250 Hereford breeders.

I went back casual teaching to save the farm, as we do. I have really only been fully involved in the farm since we were burnt out in the 2006-7 fires. Since then I have spent probably four months of each year spraying blackberries and the rest of the time fencing and doing other farm chores.

David, my husband, had a stroke in September 2008 and even though he has regained use of both legs and arms, he gets very tired. Our son and daughter-in law help on most weekends.

Fire recovery

If you live in the middle of a State Forest, then you probably will be threatened by fire at some time. It has been a remarkable experience even though I don't want it to happen again. I have put in some photos to give you a taste of this experience. Many people came from this area to help with our recovery.

Peter Snape, who you may know, was one of the people who sprang into action, informing everyone of our situation and how they could assist. Helen, his wife took many of the farm photos that I am showing. The actions of these people were invaluable.

Pasture improvement

We took out a low interest loan (3%) for five years which was part of the fire recovery, and used it for pasture improvement. Much of the land was covered in weeds. We planted Red Wheat the first year and then grasses the following year. We have found that if we plant nitrogen-fixing clover in with the wheat we will have better results. This program has been expensive, but it has given us at least some hay even in bad years.

We are cultivating 40 acres a year. To me this is another huge job we have undertaken.

Weeds are a problem even in the new pasture. We have just applied \$20,000 of fertiliser and lime. Lime has been used this year to sweeten the north-facing slopes. Originally when we bought the farm we thought that we wouldn't need to fertilise because this type of farming wouldn't be as intensive, but this is not true. The land just goes further and further backward.

David has often used alternative fertilisers in the past but we cannot afford to be as selective and have reverted to using super. We hope to change to no-till farming, but this is impossible with so many weeds in the pasture. I would love to direct-drill winter-active grasses.

Weed control

Weeds are always a big problem in large acreage hill country, the main ones in our area being blackberries, saffron thistles and St John's wort. We have been using an aeroplane to spray saffrons since we came in 2000. They are a very prickly, invasive weed. At times we have had a carpet of saffron thistles. Last year was the first time we did not use an aerial application. I took on the job using the ute and hand spray. Next year will show how successful I was!

Because we have had to replace most fences after the fire, we have used the opportunity to fence gullies out and use goats in these areas to control weeds. A three-year government grant for blackberry control has helped with the problem. I have been spending all summer spraying these weeds. If we didn't have goats it would even take more time and be double the cost.

We have been broad-jetting large areas with the tractor and I have been spraying 400 litres (sometimes 800) in a day from a unit on the back of the ute.

Hopefully next year will not see as many problem areas and can gradually decrease the use of sprays. It is a shame; my husband would love to go organic.

Vermin control

Wild dogs and foxes: Apart from the wild dog fence around our boundary with the State Forest, we use Maremma dogs to protect the goats and alpacas with the sheep. We have seen the Maremma chasing a wild dog and our pet dog chewing a kid near the yards was killed by the dogs. Alpacas would certainly chase a fox or dog in the daylight, but probably not at night.

I thought my son was controlling the foxes until a saw two foxes running past the kitchen window this last week. At least the foxes don't box up the sheep and cause mass slaughter.

Eagles and crows: We need to lamb near the house to reduce this problem. Last year we lambed too far away and had only 50% lambing. We would drive through the paddock, pass a lone lamb and find it half-eaten by the time we got back. Cast sheep were attacked by eagles and crows. Crows would remove eyes of live lambs. This year I go around them a few times a day and watch them from our house. We have probably lost two lambs a day to eagles, some lambs being quite old. I have seen the alpacas standing over a dead lamb and not letting eagles come near, but I am not sure of their ability to keep them away. We will be kidding down the goats in the gullies. The trees seem to deter the eagles, but we still see bits of kid lying around. The Maremmas have been seen chasing the eagles but can't cover the large area quickly enough.

Cockatoos: Cockatoos are pasture vermin. It is legal to shoot them but this makes hardly any impact. This is another problem that reduces our sustainability.

Grasshoppers: The only controls are spray and baits, but I feel that the damage to dung beetles and other insects is probably too great. There was an aerial spray program a few years ago for locusts. Hopefully the impending locust plague will not reach our farm.

Water

How can we improve our supply? How can we cope with climate change? Drought? Floods?

We have 28 dams but feel that with the lower rainfall they are not serving their purpose. They may not be deep enough, have leaks, or just need cleaning out. They cost a lot to maintain. Last season, being a drought year, the dams were shallow and muddy and the cattle weak, we had to pull several out of dams. We fenced off dams, forcing the cattle to go to troughs for water.

Our plan is to pump water to the highest point on the front of the farm and reticulate it to different paddocks.

We have stock and domestic and a small water right from the Tambo River. This will not only provide clean water for our stock and keep the river catchment clean,

increase the number of paddocks with a water supply, but would allow us to add stock minerals to our water supply.

Education

When I think of climate change I think of unpredictable situations, of change of practices, innovative techniques and of education.

Farmers are generally set in their ways. Farm advisers don't gel with the farmer. Farmers obtain information by word of mouth, *Weekly Times*, *Stock and Land*, *Landline* and *The Country Hour*.

"Why do we do what we do?" "Why do we have Dohnes?" "Why don't we buy a Red Angus bull?" "Why do we sell in August. "? Why don't we keep steers and sell them as bullocks?"

Who knows the answers? Where do we get the answers? Who has the knowledge? I have found lately that Landcare is a great networking and information tool. It is a way of obtaining knowledge about new farming methods for Climate Change and Nurturing the land and Nourishing the People.

They send information about courses, funding etc. They have lifted my spirits and made me more aware and in contact with the world. I really thought they were Greenies with the motto, 'Save the tree, move out the people'!

Conclusion

So, here I am, in the High Country (not quite as high as Omeo), isolated, farming and wondering what it's all about.

We're sustainable, just, with the bank's help, and the government's.

Best farming practices? Climate change? Vermin control? Weed control?

The answer? Accessible education, communication, networking.