

How to have stock without killing off your land – the fine art of pasture management

By Chris Ferreira - Landcare Solutions

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When you see a property crammed with good looking pasture, happy stock and a proud owner it certainly is a great site but one that hasn't appeared by chance and certainly has not been maintained without ongoing and careful management. Where ever you go and what ever the land that you have creating and keeping good pasture comes down to strictly following a few key principles.

- **Rule One:** *always, always, always use the Department of Agriculture stocking rate guidelines to determine the number of stock you will have and try and graze your animals as a 'herd'.* These have been carefully designed specifically to help ensure that the type and number of stock you have is tied to the ability of your land to support or carry that proposed enterprise. Without the Stocking Rate Guidelines it pretty much comes down to guess work and is why so many properties get it wrong and end up with a dustbowl.
- **Rule Two:** *try and split your paddocks so that you have only ONE soil type in each.* It should be common sense that the different areas of your land will have different abilities when it comes to maintaining pasture and carrying stock – sandy soils will inherently carry less especially over the dry months than your loams or clays. So if you have these disparate soils within the one paddock the weaker less fertilise section WILL suffer and so will the overall health and productivity of that paddock.
- **Rule Three:** *wherever possible have twice as many paddocks as stock or mobs that you plan to carry.* This gives you the inbuilt flexibility to rest paddocks when they need and thus it becomes an important safety valve when the heat wave or the flooding hits.

- **Rule Four:** *Establish perennial pastures and maybe fodder trees and shrubs.* For as long as we have been writing about landcare we have been banging on about perennial plants being the cornerstone of a sustainable landscape. Nothing has changed! These long lived plants offer a huge opportunity to extend the productivity and carrying capacity of your landscape and as such should be pursued where ever possible.
- **Rule Five:** *practise 'rotational grazing', moving animals well BEFORE the pasture is starting to suffer.* Just as getting good tough and long lived pasture established should be a priority all that hard work can be easily swept away if the pastures are grazed for too long. Rotational Grazing means you are geared up to move the animals on quickly from one paddock to another long BEFORE the tell tale signs of a stressed and damaged pasture. If you leave stock on for too long the paddock will either take much longer to recover all, worse still, it will not come back at all.
- **Rule Six:** *Try and halve your stocking rate especially over the 'lean' dry months.* This is exactly what the good farmers do and it should form a key part of your grazing strategy for the tough times. Try and sell or sell any excess stock that you have and certainly resist taking on any news ones during this time. Your paddocks just wont be able to cope.
- **Rule Seven:** *create Walk-in Walk-outs or at least a 'sacrificial area' like an arena so that you can rest your paddocks when they need it.* Again this is a really nifty strategy to give you the options to rest key paddocks when they need it. At the end of the day, it is better to have one or two sacrificial areas than to universally run down the whole property!
- **Rule Eight:** *establish trees and shrubs as shelterbelts and feature clumps to 'break the back' of the debilitating winds.* If you think we have gone on and on about perennial pasture well that is nothing compared to how often we have pleaded with our readers to consider a role for trees and shrubs on the property. At the end of the day they are the ones that will best survive the drought, bring welcome shade, shelter, and if they are the right species, blessed emergency fodder

supplies during the really tough times. Make no mistake you will not have a sustainable property if it doesn't include 'the right plants, in the right places for the right reasons!

- **Rule Nine:** *If you have horses 'Cross graze' whenever you can with sheep or small cows to keep weeds from taking over the paddocks.* You may not like to hear it but horses are bloody tough on paddocks and fussy with a capital 'F'. So occasional grazing with a mob of less discerning beasts can be a way to level the playing field (so to speak) and put the burgeoning weeds on the back foot.
- **Rule Ten:** *keep your pasture growth even and free of weeds with constant monitoring and management- the price for a weed free paddock is eternal vigilance!!!* Your best friend on the farm should be the slasher, sit-down mower and or brushcutter. These mechanical marvels can help to even out the long rank stuff your stock wont touch, break up weed strong holds, disperse tenacious lumps of manure and make sure your paddocks have an evenly palatable mix so that when the grazers are set loose on there they most likely to spread their impacts and thus minimise the damage to your all important pasture.

When all else fails, or this all sounds abit confusing just remember: Look after your paddocks so that *they* can look after your stock!

Good Luck!