



# Temperate grasses make their mark

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Mark and his family trialed saltbush in the early days in an attempt to reclaim the scalded areas. At the same time he used graded banks to control surface water. After that came lucerne which theoretically ticked all the boxes in the bid to control recharge while also adding the benefit of grazing, particularly to finish or grow out young stock out of season. The lucerne worked well to dry the soil out and control the amount of water getting back into the profile but it didn't produce anywhere near the annual pastures during the winter grazed period so the expense was very hard to justify.

## Looking for a solution

About 10 years ago Mark decided to try a mix of puccinellia and tall wheat grass on some mildly saline country where balansa clover had proven successful. The early indications were good with excellent germination. However, the spring growth rates of the balansa over-powered the grass species. The

salt hadn't caused major bare salt scalds in the areas that Mark was focussing on, but it was getting worse at a faster rate than the rest of the farm. The excess water just wasn't being used.

Mark has continually been busy looking for a solution that will stop the spread of salt and at the same time fit in with his sheep enterprise. The research into temperate perennials was in its infancy when Mark was looking for something that had good winter production as well as growth on the shoulders of the season to continue using water. At the time the most appropriate species to use was a winter active tall fescue (TF) in combination with tall wheat grass (TWG) which had been well proven locally. The winter activity of tall fescue has resulted in it being more persistent as it tends to 'shut down' at the end of spring when moisture runs out.

## Right Plant, Right Place

The Addis' have had a strong focus on 'right plant, right place' as well as investing in high seeding rates which has underpinned their success with tall fescue and tall wheat grass. Mark also treats his newly sown perennial stands like a crop, as the risk of failure was high if they weren't looked after properly in the first twelve months.

His use of 'focussed shotgun species

mixes' has proven very successful as each species performs better (or worse) in different soil types. Over time, as 'survival of the fittest' kicks in, species composition changes to reflect the 'right' mix on each of the different soil types within a paddock. As long as the persistence of the different species in the mix is not compromised by poor grazing management, this can be extremely successful. It is very difficult to fence exactly to soil type due to the inherent soil type variability.

Often, farmers establish smaller areas to reduce the risk of losses if the perennials fail. However, this can be counter-productive because a small area often becomes a management problem and very rarely can make a big enough difference in the livestock system. If it all becomes too hard (which is quite a common management problem) producers are often prepared to let a smaller area fail and go back to what they know.

## Benefits to animals

A total of 120 hectares has been sown to date across multiple paddocks, autumn seeded generally at a rate of 12 kg/ha for Resolute tall fescue and 8 kg/ha for tall wheat grass. The initial sowings were grazed a couple of times in the first year with the main benefit being in

## Farm info.

**Grower:** Mark and Sonia Addis

**Location:** 'Gordon River Estate', Cranbrook

**Arable area:** 3000 ha arable

**Ave annual rainfall:** 500 mm

**Soil type:** Mix of sandy gravel duplex and grey clays on flood plains

**Enterprise mix:** 60% pasture (sheep) 40% crop



the late spring period when the annuals had died. The main benefit Mark sees so far, is the green feed for five weeks at the end of spring as well as in summer with very even grazing and no animal health problems. As for the summer grazing, when there is summer rain, it means there is the bonus of Vitamin E for weaners, even if it's not a productive graze as it would be in winter.

The key according to Mark, is once established, perennials need to be grazed properly before they lose nutrients and palatability which ultimately affect the health or performance of the animal.

### Environmental benefits

There is no doubt that the longer term benefits of perennials certainly are that — longer term. Having tried perennials in small areas before, Mark believes that the scale is important to see a noticeable difference in the landscape as well as the farm enterprise. Planting perennials in a bigger area means there is too much to ignore so you have to manage them well otherwise there is too much at stake. When farmers only

plant little pieces of paddocks here and there, maybe fence them or not, then what often happens is that these areas either get ignored or totally hammered.

Mark is also keen to try planting a legume over the top after the perennial is established. The salt affected paddocks still need a legume component and with the commercial introduction of the new salt tolerant legume messina due in 2015, a complimentary salt tolerant pasture mix will soon be available to farmers.

### Financial benefits

While the stocking capacity of these paddocks has increased significantly, the overall farm stocking rate hasn't increased and Mark doesn't expect it to in terms of running more animals. Rather, Mark aims to run a similar number of stock on less winter grazed area and sow more area to crop. This is where the real profit driver for his enterprise will come from. However, Mark admits that it is the timing of the feed that is also of real value. The late spring and summer grazing provides significant value from Vitamin E as well

as valuable grazing days to complement summer grazing of stubbles and consequently lower supplementary feeding. The approach Mark has taken by treating these paddocks as a crop has certainly made them a large input cost. As long as the productivity of these paddocks doesn't go backwards he won't be losing out. The seasonal pasture production curve will also flatten out a bit, with better summer and autumn growth from the perennials, but lower spring growth due to the reduced annual component.

### Future plans

Taking a long-term approach to planting perennials, Mark is aiming to have up to 400 ha planted within the next few years. Continuing to take a steady approach means Mark won't be faced with the large cost of buying seed or the loss of annual pastures while perennials become established. Mark admits that if he didn't have a salt problem, he probably wouldn't be growing perennials but now that they are being grown, there are other benefits. ✓

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