

2020

SALISBURY CASE STUDY

SOCIAL REPORT

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Introduction

This Social Report for this Salisbury Case Study will look at the transition process undertaken by the MacAlpine family in their adoption and implementation of the principles and practices of regenerative agriculture. It looks at the journey of the decision makers undertaking the transition.

Background

This is the story of the MacAlpine family in north west NSW, focussing on Will MacAlpine and his parents Grant and Cathy. The family's first experience of farming and grazing began when Will MacAlpine's grandfather married into a family farming on a small block near Coolabah, on the Nyngan to Bourke road. This was a sheep farming operation and the family has continued with that industry ever since.

In 1977, when Salisbury came onto the market, Grant and Cathy identified an opportunity to buy a bigger property with drought resistant pastures (saltbush and Mitchell grass). Apart from the scalds on the relict, red creek terraces, the country was 'pristine'. It had been underutilised for grazing until split off from the large Wamboin Station in 1972. Another tract of land to the west, "Booka", was added to Salisbury later in 1977. To the north-east, the "Ginghet" blocks were added in 1999. Although early grazing practice comprised heavy stocking rates on the saltbush and Mitchell grass pastures, the former remain largely intact.

Salisbury is about two hours' drive from Warren, the nearest town with substantial commercial and medical services. Going to the supermarket, to the dentist or to play football with the local club takes the best part of a day, which takes a substantial chunk out of the working week. As is the case for many farming families, Will, his two brothers and one sister all went to boarding school in their secondary years as there was no other practical option. But for Will's family (who as of early 2020 have a toddler and another baby on the way) there are challenges getting child-minding and, in the not so distant future, getting children to the nearest primary school 60 km away.

The family has also recently invested in a property near Grenfell, operated by Will's brother Alex. It is largely independent from Salisbury, but sometimes receives excess older ewes from Salisbury.

The family is receiving professional advice on succession management for a harmonious transition to the next generation(s). This is to avoid common pitfalls such as family conflict or splitting the assets into unviable units. Will's other brother and sister are occupied in off-farm jobs.

The MacAlpine's Vision

The MacAlpine vision for regenerative agriculture developed and evolved over many years of experience to meet perceived needs of the family and their country. Their broad aim is to remain profitable while not degrading (or, where possible, improving) their asset base and its resilience to drought. Their early grazing practices noticeably degraded the country and its resilience, so they were always on the lookout for better ways of managing their stock and country.

Grant made all management decisions in the early days. Will is now joint manager with a focus on the stock. Strategic decisions for Salisbury are made by Grant, Cathy and Will at weekly meetings. Rather than a formal risk management framework, the family makes judgements based on the accumulated wisdom gained from years of experience on the property and the experience of neighbours.

From Vision to Reality

In rough chronological order, improved practices include:

- scald reclamation
- reduced stocking rates after the wool crash
- bore capping and piping
- wildlife-proof fencing
- “triggers” for stock management and
- confinement feeding of breeding ewes.

In the early 1980s, Grant noticed reclamation work on the scalds elsewhere in the Nyngan district and began experimenting with various ponding and ripping methods. He considered it an obvious thing to do because it would bring “useless” land back into production. At the time, the only use of scalds was for landing Grant’s light plane anywhere on the property. Small areas provided runoff water for local dams, but the vast majority was indeed “useless”.

Improved water management began at the initiative of government, with a subsidised bore capping and piping program. With water piped to tanks, each with two troughs, grazing was reliably spread more evenly over the property.

With the ponding and improved grazing management showing promising results, the family began investing in wildlife-proof fencing to manage total grazing pressure (from kangaroos) and wild dog predation.

Will MacAlpine is keen on reading the health of his stock and pastures and uses several “trigger” points in the annual calendar as to whether to join stock, how many, etc. and whether to feed breeders in containment pens to ensure optimum nutrition and give the pasture a rest.

The future vision shared by the whole family includes the restoration of Mitchell grass in the black soil paddocks and the introduction of exotic and native grasses to the red country – both within and outside the ponds. This is expected to increase the productivity and drought resilience of the enterprise.

Changes and Challenges

Many of the improvements on Salisbury have been subsidised by one or other level of government. Irreversible decisions were made to align with government timetables to qualify for subsidies or go it alone, with the main consideration being the availability of labour and flexibility of its deployment. For example, work on the wildlife proof fencing is labour-intensive for the MacAlpines over several years, so contractors were engaged to do some of the stock work.

The pond work is open-ended and useful from the first rainfall with little need for further input. The first green shoots of 'new normal' were evident within one year of construction of the ponds on the scalds¹. Everyone was very positive about the results; all felt excited that the effort had brought previously unproductive land into production and made their enterprise more resilient to drought. The country looks better compared with overgrazed land. It was certainly a validation of their vision.

The purchase of fencing materials is a major cost item and only returns benefits if erected around the property and between certain paddocks. The same is true of the capping and piping of bores. Grant initially resisted installing the infrastructure for containment feeding, but eventually deferred to Will's judgement – illustrating a passing of the management baton. Grant now recognises that it provides a very useful (non-mandatory) option for use in particular circumstances.

Now that much of the physical infrastructure is in place, or soon will be, focus will be on stock and pasture management. The annual cycle of triggers articulated by Will² is remarkably simple and effective. The enterprise is in a flexible position to adjust to adverse climatic circumstances, such as the current drought.

The main disappointments are the lack of pasture grasses³ in the ponds and the current severe drought. The MacAlpines plan to distribute seeds of promising pasture grasses in the ponds (and on the red and black drylands.) The enterprise is operating at reduced profitability in the drought due to the ponds, fencing and management, but is still going forwards. Because of the land's inherent characteristics and subsequent improvements, they regard Salisbury as more drought resilient than their new Grenfell property.

Over all, the family feel that Salisbury has provided a good living and they would do it all again.

¹ Called "claypans" by the family.

² From his own observations and discussions with his father.

³ Saltbushes, forbs and some grasses grow well, but the grass bulk is disappointing.