



Bulls grazing on perennial grass, bluebush and saltbush.

Rob, Sally, Jamie and Ben McTaggart 'Bolinda', Mingenew



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Sally and Rob McTaggart.

The heavier country of the Northern Agricultural Region has been significantly affected by drought over the last two years. Situated in the heart of the dry region lies 'Bolinda', located 5 km north-east of Mingenew.

'Bolinda' had rainfall totals of 223 mm and 180 mm in 2006 and 2007 respectively. This was well down on their average of 320 mm.

Owned and run by Rob and Sally McTaggart and their sons, Jamie and Ben, 'Bolinda' is a mixed cropping and cattle enterprise. The 5000 ha property is all heavy country, but is split based on two main variations in soil type. Half of

'Bolinda' sits in the Nangetty Valley and is a grey, crumbling clay, with the balance a red loam in the Lockier River valley.

'Bolinda' usually runs approximately 800 cows, mated in July for a May calving. The calves are weaned in January/February of the following year. After two dry years the McTaggarts are currently running 325 cows and the seasons have forced weaning to be conducted in December to allow the cows to maintain their condition over the summer/autumn period.

When they purchased 'Bolinda' in 1990, they initially ran sheep with cattle being introduced about 13 years ago, as the sheep were having a detrimental affect on the soil structure, particularly in the wetter months. The introduction of cattle has seen the bluebush country flourish and the relationship between this and the wheat stubbles has provided a well-balanced diet for their cattle.

Areas that were unsuitable for cropping have been fenced off over the years. These smaller paddocks of native blue and saltbush down in the valleys are now colonised with an understorey of native medics and ryegrass which, intermingled with wild oats and barley grass, have proven invaluable in the autumn. These saltbush paddocks are grazed in conjunction with their adjacent crop stubbles.

The relationship between the stubble, bluebush and the cattle's need for a balanced energy and protein diet became obvious to the McTaggart family when cattle began breaking out of stubble paddocks to get to the bluebush. They hypothesised that no amount of wheat stubble could compensate for the lack of bluebush in their diet.

Rob and Sally have found that these areas of bluebush adjacent to crop stubble have been most useful in autumn by putting cows in there one month before calving. Usually this is the time of year they are busy seeding. By locking up these areas in spring, seed is able to set, which has consequently bulked up the pastures to help fill the autumn feed gap.

2006 saw the beginning of unprecedented changes, not only on 'Bolinda', but also all other farms in the district. Usually cropping approximately 1600 ha, the paddocks were prepared for sowing, however the lack of rainfall meant that only a small number of paddocks actually went into crop and even fewer of these went through to harvest. With a poorer start to 2007, no cropping was even attempted.

This presented the McTaggarts with a major challenge. It was well known that bluebush on its own was not particularly desirable for stock and, without the winter growth of annual grasses, the balance of the feed on the property was lost. Therefore destocking became a priority. Only pregnant cows were kept and all other surplus stock were sold off. A small feedlot was established to enable them to value-add their younger stock, using a mixture of wheat seconds, barley and wheat straw, lupin hulls, molasses, urea and water. Using a calculated blend of these ingredients, Ben developed a feed program which enabled them to deliver a balanced diet, providing the right energy, protein and dry matter which was mixed in a vertical mixer to ensure an even mix and distribution to all their animals.

As the season worsened, it became obvious that even the pregnant cow numbers had to be reduced. Approximately 500 cows were relocated to Rob's brother's station in the Murchison in July of 2006. The Murchison district had experienced good rains in 2005/2006 and was able to support the extra stock. Despite the initial good seasons in the Murchison, the rain failed to return and by the summer of 2006/07 it was becoming very dry, so cows and their calves had to be returned to 'Bolinda'. The feed at 'Bolinda' was still inadequate to support any significant stock numbers so, sadly, further culling was required.

From a pasture development and grazing perspective, an interesting outcome of the dry seasons unfolded, as the McTaggarts observed the rapid spread and growth of the bluebush, which was prospering from destocking. The challenge for the McTaggarts now was to manage and develop annual grass pastures to match the bluebush to provide a sustainable feed balance in these paddocks.

The McTaggarts have had some success with the Annual Ryegrass Toxicity (ARGT) resistant annual ryegrass variety Safeguard, sown prior to the drought years. They plan to establish more of this when the seasons allow.

'We want better quality pastures and are looking at ryegrass to fill this niche, but obviously we want to avoid ARGT,' Rob said.

Rob believes that the grasses are good for the soil and ultimately he would like the pasture mix to comprise of medic and various grasses.

'Medics on their own tend to leave the soil bare, but once the grasses have established, the medics will also grow and complement each other,' he explained.

So what is ahead for 'Bolinda'? The number one priority is for the drought to break and for the seasons to get back to what is considered 'more normal'! When (not if) this occurs, the McTaggarts will have more confidence to play with their system. Prior to the drought, they did not believe they were utilising the full grazing potential of 'Bolinda' and now hope to use their cropping expertise to enhance their pasture establishment.

'We are still refining the cropping-cattle mix and looking to apply our cropping knowledge to growing pasture,' Rob explained.

The McTaggarts also believe there is potential for pasture cropping on the bluebush country. With bluebush complementing the wheat stubble diet, having the cereal and bluebush in one paddock makes a lot of sense. Will this system yield profitably or will it be used as cereal grazing is one of the many questions still to be answered for McTaggarts. However with two enthusiastic sons who are committed to grow and develop 'Bolinda', the future seems bright for this dynamic enterprise.