

## Rob and Sally McTaggart – ‘Bolinda’



**Rob and Ben McTaggart inspect the growth of different varieties of saltbush**

Rob and Sally McTaggart are one of 20 Grain and Graze demonstration farmers in the Northern Agricultural Region

With stands of bluebush adjacent to some of their stubble paddocks, Rob and Sally McTaggart avoided hand feeding their cattle this year in autumn and early winter, despite the lack of rainfall.

Their Mingenew property, Bolinda, recorded just 90mm of rain this year up until mid June and almost half of that fell in the summer.

The cropping program was cut short and the bulk of Bolinda’s cattle have been sent to Rob’s brother’s property in the Murchison, which is currently enjoying good feed conditions.

This will enable Bolinda to maximise the bulk-up of feed from any rain before spring and then hopefully return some or all of the cattle before Christmas.

The family run a mixed cropping and cattle enterprise, located 5km north east of Mingenew with an average annual rainfall is generally 320mm.

About 1600ha of the farm’s 5000ha is normally cropped, with cattle numbers normally including 500 breeders, 100 maiden heifers, 200 weaner heifers and 20 bulls.

Purchased in 1990, the property is all heavy country and can be split two ways based on soil type. Half of Bolinda sits in the Nangetty valley and is grey clay, with the balance a red loam, being the Lockier River valley.

Rob believes he has a reasonably good understanding of his salt country. “We don’t have salty creeks but we are dealing with an old sea bed,” he says.

“If our farming practices are not correct we are concerned the salts will build up on the surface. We don’t want salt concentrating on bare ground – the more groundcover we have the better.”

***The bluebush areas cover 20 per cent of the total farm area and supported 19 percent of the farm’s total grazing days last year, at a time of year when feed is ordinarily short.***

He has made some observations about slender iceplant and believes it is a product of farming techniques on heavy country and bare degraded ground.

“The grasses need to be encouraged to compete with the iceplant,” Rob says. “A few years ago we had 3.5t wheat crops growing adjacent to iceplant.”

Areas on Bolinda that are unsuitable for cropping have been fenced out over the years. These smaller paddocks of native bluebush and saltbush down in the valleys, now colonised with an understorey of native medics, ryegrass, wild oats and barley grass have proved to be invaluable in the autumn.

Initially the McTaggarts were running sheep with their cropping operation. When they introduced cattle 12 years ago they noticed that this saltbush country looked much happier supporting cattle.

The saltbush pasture paddocks are grazed in conjunction with the adjacent crop stubbles.

The relationship between the stubble and bluebush and the cattle’s need to balance energy and protein became obvious to the McTaggarts when cattle began breaking out of stubble paddocks to get to the bluebush.

Rob and Sally find these areas of bluebush adjacent to crop stubble most useful in autumn and put cows in one month before they calve, when in an ordinary year they are busy seeding.

By locking up these areas of bluebush in the spring (at seed set) they have encouraged the bluebush to bulk up over the years.

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Inclined to minimise risk, Rob can see the need to grow crop and while breeding his way into cattle, his next goal is to match his farming techniques to increased stock numbers.

The couple readily admit that they have not pushed their stocking rate to the maximum. “We are still refining the cropping – cattle mix and looking to apply our cropping knowledge to growing pasture,” Rob says. “We want better quality pastures and have introduced Safeguard ryegrass to combat Annual Ryegrass Toxicity and have prepared a further 200 ha for planting in 2007”

Rob McTaggart is inclined to think that subtropical perennial grasses are not the answer on his property. “Although they grow well when conditions are right, early summer rains are not reliable,” he says. “We sowed a mix of Katambora Rhodes grass and Bambatsi panic in spring 2003 but germination was not great and then we had only 25 mm of rain in the next eight months.”



**Bulls grazing happily on bluebush and saltbush**