



Case Study: Mooneys Gap



Since 2009, people who travel the Pyrenees Highway regularly have noticed the transformation of a farm around ten kilometres north east of Ararat in the southern Wimmera region of Victoria.

WHO
Rod Vearing
WHERE
Mooneys Gap
Ararat Victoria
CATCHMENT
Wimmera
PROPERTY SIZE
1000 Ha

Mooneys Gap is the site of the Perennial Pasture Systems (PPS) "EverGraze" supporting site.

The Perennial Pasture Systems (PPS) group was formed in mid 2007, reacting to concerns about the lack of research and extension into productive pastures in the Upper Wimmera and Central Highlands region of Victoria. Since the group was formed 125 farm enterprises across the Upper Wimmera and Central Victoria have joined PPS.

The aim of the group is to push the boundaries of perennial pasture research

in the region and to provide information on productive pasture management.

EverGraze was a national research, development and extension project that designed, tested and implemented farming systems based on perennials to increase profitability of livestock enterprises and at the same time reduce ground water recharge and soil loss by water and wind in the high rainfall zone of southern Australia.

EverGraze

PPS was successful in gaining funding to implement an EverGraze supporting site. The Perennial Pasture Systems (PPS) group's Mooneys Gap EverGraze Supporting Site consists of two separate trial paddocks. The Lucerne paddock was established to test the viability of establishing lucerne pastures in areas where they have not been traditionally grown.



Rod Vearing takes up the story;

"When I was approached by Simon Brady, the President of PPS, who invited me to host the PPS EverGraze site I realised what a great opportunity it was to trial things on our farm to assess their viability as well as increasing my pasture knowledge. At the same time I felt a bit overwhelmed and unsure of how I would be able to handle the challenge of being the site host.

We purchased Mooneys Gap in 2000, which allowed me to achieve my ambition of becoming a full time farmer after spending 25 years in building industry and operating smaller farms on a part time basis. Mooneys Gap was part of a deceased estate and had been managed on a maintenance basis for several years. As a consequence it had low fertiliser inputs and a limited pasture improvement program.

Although we had plans to commence pasture improvement, the reduced cash flow from the extended borrowing in purchasing such a large property combined with the large expenses with drought feeding through the early to mid 2000's meant that we were not able to implement any of those plans. Even when we were in a position to start a pasture improvement program I realised that I didn't have the skills necessary to properly implement it and there were very few opportunities in our region to attend pasture field days at that time to increase my knowledge. Looking back there were several other farmers in a similar position, which was the catalyst behind the formation of the Perennial Pasture Systems group.

Pasture Establishment

My concerns about being a pasture site host were quickly alleviated as there was great planning right from the start, PPS put their Project Manager Rob Shea in to manage the site and asked committee member Paul Harrington to oversee the project. Cam Conboy from Gorst Rural Lake Bolac then came on board as the honorary agronomist and we started planning both the lucerne and phalaris trials. During the establishment year we had several meetings in the paddock and Cam's advice was crucial to getting the pastures into a productive state; we all learnt something every time Cam visited the site. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance from Paul Harrington, who will drop everything he is doing to come down to advise me about his thoughts on the site before I make important management decisions".

Despite a slow start due to the late autumn break and some weed issues in the lucerne, the pastures really started to take off.

The phalaris also looked great during its first spring but I don't think any of us realised what a productive pasture it was going to turn out to be.



Cam Conboy, Rod Vearing & Paul Harrington in the phalaris pasture.

Rod couldn't stop thinking how a targeted pasture improvement program could transform our farm. His enthusiasm was a bit tempered during the first spring when Cam advised against grazing the lucerne until it had flowered for the first time but the patience paid off with a healthy stand going into its first summer. Rod said "the lucerne looked so good, that sometimes I would just grabbed a stubby after work and came down to have a look at it".

Both pastures soon became part of the farm system and the results exceeded both PPS and Rod's expectations.

The lucerne was soon providing quality finishing feed for lambs as well as producing hay to replenish the Mooneys Gap haystacks.



The phalaris pasture also started to produce high quality feed and the benefits of rotational grazing and good weed control were soon on display for PPS members.

The phalaris carried twice the stock that the comparison annual pasture was able to, while at the same time enhancing ground cover and water use efficiency.

Results

The combined paddocks allowed Rod to carry lambs over the summer and target higher sale weights. This proved so successful in the wet summer of 2010/11 that Rob was able to make a windfall profit by contracting lambs which achieved enough profit compared to his old system to fully pay for the phalaris and lucerne pasture establishment.

The details are laid out in the EverGraze Mooneys Gap case study 2 which is on the PPS website.



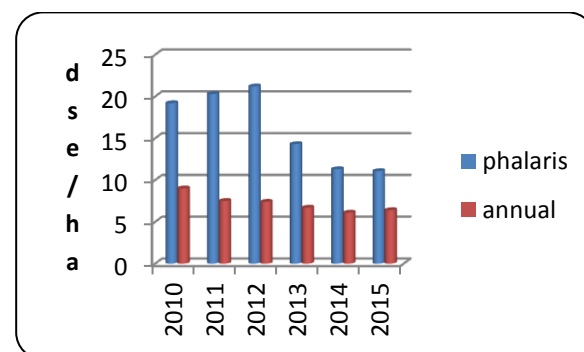
After the initial success of the PPS/EverGraze site, Rod quickly started replicating the pastures on Mooneys Gap with lucerne and phalaris now planted along the valley which forms part of the property. This is an ongoing process and has the pastures standing out after summer rain, greening the valley and awaiting the managed rotations that are now part of the farm system.

The paddocks have created a lot of interest from other farmers as they are very visible from the Pyrenees Highway and Rod is regularly asked what was going on there.

Rod is always happy to impart his experience and had to talk to other farmers when they visited the site on field days. He says "I was pretty nervous at first but I really wanted to tell the story of what was happening and have now got over that, I was even asked to do a presentation on the site at the PPS Annual Conference in 2011. Prior to PPS and the EverGraze site I didn't have the confidence to talk to leading farmers about pastures but now I am confident to discuss pasture issues and learn from them".

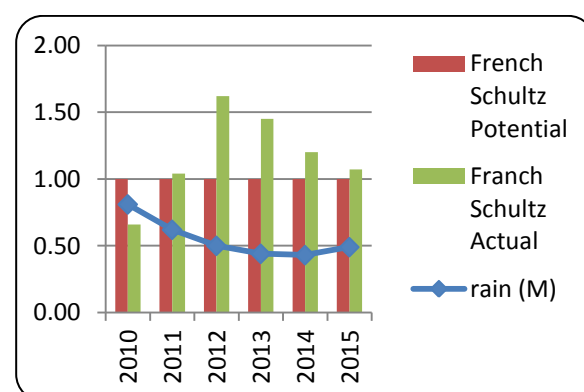
Today

The dry seasons of 2013 to 2015 have tested the pastures but the original lucerne pasture is still producing well and despite a drop in carrying capacity the phalaris pasture is still carrying near double the stock of the annual comparison.



Stocking rates phalaris vs. annual

PPS has analysed the stocking rate in the Mooneys Gap phalaris combined with the annual rainfall and has shown that whilst the stocking rate has declined, it is a function of reduced rainfall rather than a pasture decline. PPS used the French – Schultz method which calculates potential stocking rate against rainfall as an analysis and it shows that the pasture is still reaching it potential.



French – Schultz analysis of phalaris

Practice Change

The PPS/EverGraze paddocks gave Rod the opportunity to change his lamb enterprise from selling them at the end of

spring regardless of their weight to one where we can finish lambs to increase our returns from that part of our farm business. He have now replicated the PPS/EverGraze paddocks and as soon as the autumn break occurs, he is ready to get the rotations fired up and get the full benefit out of the pasture improvement program he has done so far. Rod says “I can’t wait until I get over the whole farm and have pastures like the PPS/EverGraze paddocks.

Personal Change

Inaugural PPS President Simon Brady commented that “The Mooneys Gap site has shown that lucerne pastures can be extended away from the more typical river and creek flats into more undulating country and add to the overall production of the region’s farms.

The phalaris trial paddock has achieved the large productivity gains possible with a productive phalaris based pasture. The site has also demonstrated best practice management techniques to enhance the production and persistence of the pasture. What we didn’t anticipate was that Rod’s confidence as a producer would grow quicker than his pastures

We all remember one of the first outside visits to the site in June 2010, when Rod told the EverGraze National Steering Committee that before PPS he didn’t have the confidence to talk to leading producers and therefore didn’t attend field days or seminars. He said that being a PPS member had changed this and told of his growing ability to ask questions and seek advice from other PPS farmer and agribusiness members.

He was soon talking to farmer groups and researchers about the project in both public and private; he also never misses a PPS event”.



*Rod Vearing with
EverGraze project
coordinators 2011*

Current PPS President Wayne Burton says “It is interesting to hear Simon talk about Rod’s first public appearance in his pastures; now we just send visiting farm groups out there and leave him to it. His achievements with the help of PPS are an inspiration to other producers and he tells his story in a clear and honest fashion”.

Rod has had mentoring from PPS members Paul and Dennis Harrington as well as Steven and Peter Start who have done contract pasture spraying and establishment on Mooneys Gap.

Commitments on their own farms mean that they can no longer provide contract services so Rod is in the market for his own pasture seeder. He comments” I am still considering what machine I should buy, but once again PPS are helping because they have a demonstration set up comparing tyne and disc seeders plus I have heaps of fellow PPS members that I can ask for advice”. I love being part of such an innovative and passionate group. I like the social part as well and wouldn’t miss the annual study tour; I had my first overseas trip last year when PPS went to new Zealand. I have learnt so much as well as making heaps of new friends.

Further reading can be found on the PPS website

www.perennialpasturesystems.com.au

Where there is the full report on the project as well as four other case studies. Contact PPS Project Manager Rob Shea 0438 521357 – yadin@netconnect.com.au

PPS is supported by the Wimmera CMA



*This project is supported by Wimmera
CMA and funding through The Australian
Government National Landcare
Programme*