Derek Walter Koolah

Willow Creek

"It was a way to try and make money out of doing an activity that we loved. Now it's not so much even about the money. It's about getting out there, spending time on the farm, spending time with the kids on weekends and things like that."

Enterprise: Beef

Property size: 150ha arable

Annual rainfall: 750mm

Why regenerative agriculture?

For a long time we based our enterprise around high input, high production farming, trying to utilise the high rainfall that we've got to its maximum efficiency. But we were finding that the beef prices didn't follow the cost of inputs, and as everything started increasing in price.

So it got more and more important to really work out what inputs were the most important and to start pulling out some of the ones that were less important.

This questioning of our own system, then lead us into adopting a regenerative approach, which in the end has given us a renewed focus on the health of our soils, and the positive impact it is having on our cattle's health, and our family.

What practices and principles have you introduced to make your farm more regenerative?

Early on in the transition (2010) we stopped our use of animal health chemicals and looked more carefully over the next 10 years at adopting our grazing system to holistic, then Grazing Naturally principals. Good animal health has been maintained and pasture diversity increased, even in areas previously dominated by Kikuyu.

Around that time we also started to wean off the use of synthetic sprays and chemical fertilisers.

More recently (2021) we purchased a Soilkee Renovator and have started using multi-species varieties, sowing up to 18 different varieties. As a result of purchasing the Soilkee we have done a baseline for carbon sequestration in 2019 to accrue Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs).

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What have been your greatest challenges?

One of the biggest problems we've got here is Kikuyu grass. It's very invasive, and it tends to take over the pasture, leading to little diversity.

In the past Kikuyu has required a fair bit of effort to get rid of it, to stop it taking over the place, so we are really looking for a system that we could minimise the Kikuyu proliferation and maximise other multi-species plants for grazing.

We also really struggled for a couple of years when transitioning to regenerative agriculture in getting stocking rates right with the breeding herd, not wanting to buy in trading stock.

What have been your biggest successes?

Farming in a regenerative manner has enabled us to improve our efficiency, making it easier to do what we are doing, decreasing outgoing costs and stress.

Our biggest successes have included steadily improving our grazing, particularly once we introduced the Grazing Naturally system. This has led to stopping the cutting of hay/silage in 2017.

When we started to really prioritise the grazing on parts of the farm and leave other parts to rest, we found that a lot of pastures and seed that was in the system which weren't germinating under our previous regime, actually got a chance to germinate, survive and thrive.

Seeing the benefits in the health of the soil and plants has been very exciting.

Where to from here?

A big step is to continue to implement the Soilkee Renovator system and integrating stock grazing successfully. We are still learning, but feel confident with where we are heading. Once we can prove the system we can look to expand.

With the Strathalbyn abattoir coming online soon, we aim to start farm gate sales, and in line with our tourism venture aim to market as Carbon Natural Beef.

We would like to trial Cloud Agronomics for carbon estimation for the next 100ha of our farm to come online as regenerative, using drone imagery for pasture species identification and data analysis. This is a costly option, but it would be a great add-on to the Soilkee system, and for future contracting in regenerative and organic agricultural practices.

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