

MICHAEL COBIAC PRESERVING LANDSCAPES AND OPTIMISING PRODUCTIVITY



Michael and his partner Catherine have managed the family property “Chelestan” at Reedy Creek since 2010. They operate a self-replacing Angus beef cattle herd and a Merino sheep flock.

Their focus has been to develop a flexible management system that responds to seasonal and market challenges. They are focussed on making the 600 hectare property as productive as it can be, whilst also maintaining and improving its natural values for future generations.

“My main aim in farming is to have a productive and profitable livestock grazing business, provide a healthy environment for my children to grow up in, and to preserve the magnificent landscape I live and work in.” - Michael Cobiac

Background

Southeast of Kingston and northeast of Robe, on the flats bordering Reedy Creek you will find “Chelestan”. A 600 hectare property dominated by the majestic River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), which forms an impressive part of the landscape in this region. Michael Cobiac operates a self-replacing Angus beef cattle herd, aiming to supply yearlings to the feedlot trade. He also has a Merino sheep flock aimed at producing first-cross sucker lambs for the supermarket trade. Michael is the sole labour unit in the business and is supported by his partner Catherine Bell and their two young children, William and Zoe.

The Cobiac family have owned the property since 1959, which was run by Michael's father up until a few years ago. Michael worked away from the farm for 25 years and returned in 2010, he gradually assumed a greater management role on the property, before purchasing the business in 2014.

Revegetation

The property is home to hundreds of mature River Red Gums dotted across the landscape, which not only provide a beautiful aesthetic to the property, but also afford shelter for livestock and provide habitat for native wildlife. With lifetimes spanning between 400 and 600 years, these trees would have stories to tell, including tales of flood, fire and drought.

Over many decades there has been a demise of the smaller and medium trees due to grazing, leaving only the very old generations remaining. This is not an issue isolated to the Cobiac property; it occurs in areas right across the

State, and in some areas poses a threat to entire River Red Gum populations. Grazing has been a part of the regime on this property for generations, commencing early last century. In its natural form the landscape would support a range of trees with varying age and size, but this is not the case in the current landscape. Michael noticed that even the oldest trees in the population looked to be declining, which led him to question how he was going to ensure these trees persisted in the long term, ensuring there were younger generations to follow – much like the history of his family farm.

Understanding that this situation would take years to rectify, Michael decided to begin a program of tree protection and revegetation now, so that the benefits would be seen in his lifetime, and for generations to follow. The first stage of his program consisted of two elements:

- The protection of a group of the youngest existing trees, allowing them to fully mature via exclusion of stock through fencing. This also has the added benefit of allowing the understorey to re-establish in the absence of grazing; and
- Revegetation of the area with around 500 River Red Gum seedlings and companion species in specially selected and protected sites across the property.

These works have been financially assisted through the Natural Resources South East ‘Bucks For Bush’ program, which provides financial assistance for fence construction and seedling establishment assisting in the protection and re-establishment of important habitats.

Michael is committed to expanding the revegetation program and says “In the future we would like to see further seedlings planted, possibly along with some direct seeding. We would like to plan this across large areas of the farm in an attempt to replicate the natural scattered nature of the River Red Gum populations, rather than plant in lines or blocks.” Michael would also like to take this a step further and re-introduce understory species where possible.

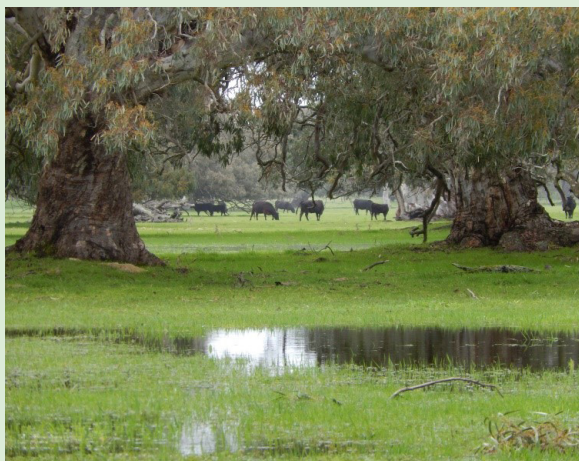
Pasture Productivity

Past grazing practices on the property had also resulted in a very high proportion of annual species in the pasture, such as ryegrass, barley grass and sub clover. These are nutritious and productive during the spring, however, annual pastures provide very little residual dry matter to protect the soil surface during the dryer summer and autumn months. The presence of these annuals led to significant bare areas, which significantly increased the risk of wind erosion across the property.

Michael was keen to explore options to mitigate this, and says, “About a decade ago, the family implemented a pasture renovation program to increase the content of perennial species across the property. Phalaris, fescue and cocksfoot have now been established and, combined with more appropriate grazing practices, has resulted in pasture ground cover remaining at desirable levels throughout most years, which we are pleased about.”

Michael has also recently commenced the “Pasture Principles” program, teaching participants to combine profitable livestock production with long term sustainability of pasture resources. Key principles of the program are promoting healthy soil and strong and vigorous plants, ultimately seeking to manage pastures for optimum production.

Michael and his family continue their commitment to preserving the landscape they are part of, alongside optimising productivity, which he says “will always remain an exciting and challenging path”.



PROPERTY INFORMATION

Producer Michael Cobiac

Location Reedy Creek, South Australia

Property Area 600 hectares

Enterprise Angus Beef Cattle and Merino Sheep

Average Rainfall 620 mm

CONTACT

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