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Peel Pastoral capture carbon

Wrattonbully farm builds soil health

Peel Pastoral has taken the first step in carbon farming and five years on have succeeded in soil sequestration

BY CATHERINE MILLER

MANY livestock producers are wary about any discussion on greenhouse emissions, with the finger being pointed at ruminants for being big methane emitters.

But the Woodard family, Peel Pastoral, Wratonbully, believe there could be real opportunities for carbon farming.

Their early calculations are showing that sequestering soil carbon alone should more than cancel out the emissions from their 1200 head winter-calving Angus herd and 3800 self-replacing composite ewes.

Six years ago, the South East grazing business entered into a emission reduction fund with the federal government. They also took 50 soil tests from across the farm to establish their baseline soil organic carbon levels.

Coming back to the same locations last year, Todd Woodard said they found a 12 per cent lift in the organic carbon levels in the top 30 centimetres of the soil.

At 30cm to 1 metre in depth there was 30pc more stored soil carbon than five years ago.

"We knew carbon was missing from our system and we needed to know how

to build it up," Mr Woodard said.

"I thought we needed some skin in the game - if we put some money up to get some baseline testing then we were really invested."

Peel Pastoral shared their experiences during the Mackillop Farm Management Group's *Carbon Without the Jargon* workshop.

Mr Woodard attributes much of the soil carbon sequestration to following regenerative grazing principles, which he says have also made the farm more resilient to the variability in seasons.

The livestock are also healthier, with no cattle being drenched except on some leased land.

"One of our mottos is to love our grass more than we love our livestock," Mr Woodard said.

"The livestock are where they are because of what they are doing for our soils and pastures."

He says a big emphasis in their time-controlled grazing system is measuring their pasture production regularly to match stocking rates to their carrying capacity.

"We don't buy in heaps of hay to feed - we match our numbers to match the amount of feed we have in front of us," he said.



Anne, Todd and Tom Woodard and Alex Walter have managed to increase their soil carbon levels.

"That way we are less inclined to overstock and really strip our soils back and open them up to heat and destroy the biology."

Peel Pastoral's 3100 hectares of owned and leased country is divided into about 20ha sized paddocks, with 18 paddocks used in each rotation.

Cattle and sheep are often grazed together on the clover and perennial grass pastures.

During the growing season the stock are moved every one to three days with 30-40 days spell.

"We tend to graze a bit higher than most coming out of the paddock at about 1200 (kilograms of dry matter per hectare) and back in at 2 tonnes so we are not always right down to the board," he said.

In the non-growing season this rotation extends out to 7-10 days with a 60-90 day rest before stock return.

20pc of the farm, usually

underperforming paddocks, is set aside each year from spring to late autumn. This allow the pastures to complete their life cycle.

The tall, dry feed is then strip grazed using electric fencing with a big mob of cows.

Mr Woodard says their "non-negotiables" are having ground cover at all times and having perennial pastures to take advantage of rainfall whenever it falls.

They have also swapped conventional fertilisers for spreading compost on about a quarter of the land each year and spray out biological products in conjunction with a nutrient package onto pastures several times a year.

These sprays are formulated by Tim Watt from Biosys Agribusiness, based at Mount Gambier, after testing the nutritional content of Peel Pastoral's pastures and even the animals.

"In the biology there is

lot of things but one of the main things is, one of these is *Trichoderma* which is a stubble digesting fungi which helps break down any dry grass residue and gets that rapidly broken down into the soil," Mr Woodard said.

Dung beetles are also hard at work at Peel Pastoral breaking down manure, both native species and winter-active *Bubas bison* which were introduced to the farm nearly 20 years ago.

Despite the fantastic results in the first round of soil testing, the Woodards have no plans to sell any carbon credits the regulator may issue to them.

They are keen to see if they can continue to build the soil carbon and know they may need their credits to offset their own emissions.

"It was in the back of our minds that it could be another layer of income over the same hectare of land but that may never come to fruition,"

Mr Woodard said.

"We expect to see some production issues but it will also help provide that assurance that we are doing the right thing from a production perspective for our customers and city-based friends."

"The wider community are demanding more and more of us as land stewards so we need to be seen to be doing the right thing."

Using the Greenhouse Accounting Tool developed by the Primary Industries Climate Change Centre, Mr Woodard says they have calculated their livestock and on-farm energy emissions to be about 3500 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents.

"We think we are in the positive (more than carbon neutral) and that is without counting the 60,000 trees, planted and native, on the farm," he said.

"The next step is to employ someone to really go through it with us."

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