

FARMER BILL'S DIARY

Bill Haddleton 5th generation farmer Katanning WA



bringing the salty paddock to life

VIRGARA
BROTHERS 1964

Farmers
Resource
#1

FOREWORD

Hi, I'm Bill, a 5th generation Farmer from Katanning.

Much of our landscape is changing, and alarmingly so much of it now salt affected. I've always been aware of this, and slowly have watched it progress, from the odd salt scold, to now many affected paddocks and mid slope seepages that then turn beautiful pasture or crop paddocks further afield, into a useless desert!

Salty land here is part of the landscape, some areas is worse affected than others. I've always known about saltbush, but never needed to grow it to the extent that it is now needed. All land is precious now, and we need to use it all, in one way or other, (not just fence it off and leave it) in order to turn out decent animals. Our real eye opener started in 2018. We had a creekline and the land we have affectionately named 'the swamp' fenced off and growing saltbush around the edges and salt tolerant tussock grasses intermittently throughout. It had reasonable coverage, but was barren in the saltiest areas.

We put our lambs into these paddocks, and they made weight enough to sell them. We were thrilled. That was our turning point, when we really pricked our ears up. Saltbush during the summer was the only thing that was green, and it could fatten lambs! We were sold!



Bill standing in the 'salty paddock' looking at the first trial of the generic saltbush

FOREWORD

So we ripped our saltiest major paddock, and in the winter of 2018, we planted half of the 35 acres to a generic saltbush. It died shortly after planting, due to waterlogging.

So back to the drawing board. We knew the SB worked, but we would have to do it better. Our Local Nursery in Katanning was growing a variety named Eyres Green, which was new to me, and on studying this we learned that it could grow on bare salty land, could ~~be~~ grazed hard and regrowth was strong, and was quite palatable to the animals. The growing on bare salt was the major feature that sold us on using Eyres Green (EG) over other varieties.

 We use sprays very sparingly on the farm, as an overall attitude to farming.

We use rotational grazing to control the weeds and manipulate the paddocks, with the bonus of creating the opportunity for the useful bugs to be on and in the soil. (Dung  beetles break down manure, as an example). Spraying is mostly only needed for 1) creating fire breaks, 2) spray topping paddocks at the end of the growing season that need to be preserved, which are not intended to be harvested or made into hay.



Generic saltbush initially chosen and contour ploughing didn't cut it in this high salt paddock

GETTING INTO IT

March:

Had the loan of a Ripper Moulder, began right away as we had early rains. Didn't want to leave this paddock too late, or else I'd get bogged! Also wanted to leave plenty of time for the parrots to eat the Gilford grass bulbs, and thus when we plant the EG they leave it alone! (Well that is my plan anyway).

Ripped in the direction of allowing the water to run towards the creek, and enable it to drain the salt away. We ripped it in rows 6 metres apart, just wide enough to get our small tractor down to plant an understory of salt tolerant rye grass, thus giving the animals an understory of grain/cereal to eat, other than just salty food.

My understanding is that the sheep can eat up to 200grams only a day, so additional food is necessary.



*I went as deep
as our ripper
would go, for
this land it was
about 30-40cm,
and it threw
mounds about
30cm high .*



PADDOCK PREPARED

April:

So far, so good. Parrots have really cleaned the paddock out!.

We waited for the parrots to clean the paddock of the bulbs, pretty much the very end of April, just prior to our planting. At that time, the paddocks were pretty bare!.

We sprayed a mix of roundup and a pre-emergent spray. The purpose of the pre-emergent is so that no weeds (and even an early germination of rye grass) germinate on the top of the mounds.

On the better ground where there is going to be pasture and ryegrass (ie: the less salty areas), we want the rye grass to be part of the system, but not right next to the EG.

So we didn't spray the entire area, we just sprayed the mounds.

Our reason so the saltbush has no competition (competition for water is the main issue here).

Just waiting for the rains to come!.



The lines look a long way apart now, but when the SB is mature, we still need to get the tractor between them and we understand EG grows long laterals.

PLANTING

May:

We were keen to get the plants in the ground before the opening rains, as we knew that if we could achieve this, we would have better growth, and thus grazing 8-9 months out, rather than waiting for the following year. We learned that they were ready, and good rootball systems had developed on the earlier propagated specimens, so we could get cracking with our 4000 stems, earlier than they are usually ready (June/July).

But this would mean a lot of work for us.

Next job was to dig a small hole at the top of each mound, ready for the plant, then water it! A big job for 4000 plants, but very necessary. Then we planted into the hole in the top of each mound, which was freshly wet. We did this in a series of days, taking about a week all up to complete the planting.

A week later we re-watered everything. Too much investment had gone into this project to see it fail.

Closer to the break of the season we then sowed our understory of rye grass in the rows, along with a hay crop at each end of the paddock where it was not salty. Our plan here is to have this as complimentary dry food for the sheep whilst grazing the saltbush.



I'm happy with the spacing between each planted EG, and the mounds are small enough to get over with a Quad Bike.

LOOKING STRONG

June/July

Lovely soaking, nourishing rains. A great feeling. Plants are holding up, didn't get waterlogged, and didn't get destroyed by the parrots (which was our initial concern), and are looking strong.

This is real hope for future summer grazing! 😊



Contrary to traditional thinking of contour ploughing, we ran our mounds toward the creek. The water is draining down the sides of the mounds to the creek, and the plants are safe on the top of the mounds.

COMING ALIVE

August -late

Standing tall EG is looking real healthy, very happy - I'm a bit surprised how fast it seems to have taken off. We've all seen it, plants have that energy when they've rooted.

The paddock is coming alive I can feel it. 😊



We see here that there are signs of natural pasture, we should have used a lot more pre-emergent spray on the mounds.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



September:

What a magnificent sight! Plants growing so well, enormous growth in such a short period of time, and have tillered out very well. This is totally uplifting to the entire farm to know that this resource is growing and will be available in the future.

Incredible to see the plants looking so lush on such bare salty ground that otherwise supports just button grass and barley grass! The rye grass is growing well on the lesser salty areas. The plants are growing so well, we decided to give them a boost, and fertilized them!

This entailed a few trips out to the paddocks, walking and down the rows, sprinkling a light amount of fertilizer on each plant. During the next rains, the growth from this was just phenomenal, - it really had made a difference.



This is really pleasing!

HORIZON OPTIMISTIC



October late:

Truly a sight for happy farmer eyes! The paddock has really come alive, and we're really thrilled with the EG. I was so impressed I had to get an idea of the size of EG just for my own sake, as well as anyone else who might be interested. So I had a picture taken with me alongside an EG - they're standing about half a metre high! Good strong heavy foliage, I am now very optimistic that we will get a light autumn graze out of this, and it will be outstanding feed for next summer.



should get a light grazing out of this, this coming Autumn, 12 months earlier than we expected. I believe that with a well-established saltbush stand, you would get as many grazing days out of it as you would out of ordinary pasture, but it is far more valuable because of the time of the year, ie Summer.

SOFT - PALATABLE

November early:

With the latest round of rains, which aren't doing the crops any good at all, our saltbush paddocks have now jumped another 400mm!. The bushes are very soft and palatable now, so we are closely watching fences and gates to ensure it stays locked up for a bit longer!

We are now really watching the different areas of the plantation to see where it most outperforms – so far the saltiest area growths are not very far behind the less salty areas. Time will tell when the summer wears on, and the plants are forced to use water further down.

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Bill will provide an ongoing Diary of progress for the coming season which includes water management covering both portable troughs and surprising issues with dam's and the detrimental impact on the livestock.



Farmers Resource

Dom and Sam are keen to publish a series of Farmer's Diary's from around the country. The initiative is aimed at providing a resource of experiences that highlights local issues and you, farmers, land owners, mining executives have solved your specific challenges. The type of land, the machinery used and how you prepared the paddock and how you planted the Eyres Green.

We believe your story is important, please we encourage you to take photo's and highlight your issues and how you dealt with them.

We look forward to hearing from you,

Dom and Sam

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