



# Paddock subdivision allows more strategic grazing

**A** desire to better manage his steep hill country has seen Terry Hubbard subdivide larger paddocks according to land class and adopt a more strategic approach to grazing management as he explained to Catriona Nicholls.

“The biggest challenge we have is our terrain, I guess it would be fair to call it undulating to steep,” Terry said.

“In addition to this, when we bought the first portion of property back in 1989, and the balance 10 years later, we had a range of paddock sizes from 280 hectares to 120 ha – not a good basis for managing rotational grazing.

As such, we ran a fairly loose grazing regime and this really did nothing for our native perennial pastures.

An approach by the local Department of Primary Industries Branch (DPI Victoria) looking for properties on which to trial controlled grazing on steep hill country to encourage perennials sparked a change.

With support from the Australian Government we divided a 200 ha block into six smaller blocks by land class and experimented with a fixed number of sheep moving through these paddocks.

## Steep decline

“Our hills suffered so badly during the drought they were just bare and when rain did come it was mainly capeweed that dominated – we lost an enormous amount of perennial grasses off the hills.

Our north-facing slopes were most affected as the stock graze them preferentially – the south slope grasses tend to be sour.

## farm info.

**Case study:** Terry Hubbard

**Location:** Three Sisters, Victoria

**Property size:** 840 ha

**Mean annual rainfall:** 600 mm

**Soils:** Friable gravel-based soils

**Enterprises:** Sheep (2000 ewes) and cattle (100 cows)



Photo: Kate Sargeant

*Terry Hubbard's steep hill country is responding to division of northerly and southerly aspects and implementation of strategic grazing to increase native perennial cover.*

## key points

- Subdividing according to landclass allows more strategic grazing management of perennial pasture species
- An EverGraze® Whole Farm Grazing Strategies course provides the tools to develop a system of grazing management across the property
- Rotational grazing is the key to promoting productivity and persistence in perennial native grasses and introduced species.

The original funded program locked up the perennials to allow them to set seed.

I'm still doing this to encourage seeding and we are increasing our fencing to better control stock movement.

We've also taken a more whole-farm approach. We lost about 280 ha during the 2007 bushfire and through a generous subsidy we have been able to keep fencing along land class lines and we're about two-thirds of the way through.

We are currently working with a DPI Victoria agronomist, Kate Sargeant and her team, to manage our steep slopes and increase

productivity on our more arable areas. We have formed a group of local producers to complete the new EverGraze® Whole Farm Grazing Strategies course with Kate and Gary McLarty. This course gave us the tools and skills required to put an ongoing system in place for grazing management of the whole farm.

At this stage, I am anxious to see if we can get some of the microlaena (weeping grass) and danthonia (wallaby grass) to regenerate through grazing management and I am reluctant to interfere by spraying the hills to control the weeds. Although the weeds that emerged after the summer rain were amazing.



During our first two or three fields days, when people first examined our slopes I am sure most thought nothing would grow there.

On more recent visits they were pleasantly surprised the microlaena and wallaby grasses were growing back on the lower slopes.

We are hoping that with prevailing winds and supportive conditions, the grasses will find their way back up the hills.

### Grazing for cover

The decision to move stock through the paddocks is guided by *EverGraze* measurements and through visual evaluation – I can see what it looks like on the other side of the fence where sheep have been excluded.

There is a view that stock will get used to moving through the paddocks, but I have opened up the lower country and am letting lambing ewes graze a few paddocks at once. At the moment, with heavily pregnant ewes, I am reluctant to move them.

Our management perhaps isn't what it could be under rotational grazing. I was disappointed when it came to shearing and we had a break in the wool on the stock

running on our Supporting Site. The Grazing Strategies group suggested the break may have been due to inconsistency in the feed availability. That sheep needed to be moved more often, and perhaps through more paddocks to maintain wool quality.

But I was impressed with what happened to the pastures when we moved stock on. We've had a lovely autumn, with good rain at regular intervals and the pastures are responding.

We have a mix of pasture species, a lot of perennial ryegrass and sub-clovers, which have done quite well and are still doing well on the southern faces.

But there were days during the drought where you would see dust blown away. The irony is we would have been totally burnt out if we had the pastures that we have now.

### Mapping the future

Currently, we are working with Kate on mapping the farm electronically as part of the grazing course, which is quite an exciting exercise.

I am trying to plot in all the fences as they are, which will show us the paddocks that have opportunities for more fencing.

In our case, I would like to have a whole-farm plan showing fences, water points and areas of each paddock and land classes.

From there the theory is that we can work out what a particular paddock can carry and for how long stock need to stay on it throughout the year.

Our system is about getting a balance. We have been retired from some time and one of the big things we focus heavily on is revegetating the area of land we have locked up for biodiversity value.

I believe most farmers genuinely believe they would like to leave the farm in a better condition than when they took over." 🌱

*EverGraze – More livestock from perennials* is a Future Farm Industries CRC, Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Wool Innovation research and delivery partnership.

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By Kate Sargeant, DPI Victoria

science behind the story

- **The Hubbard's Supporting Site is a steep hill country site with a north and south face, divided along the ridge.**

Terry fenced the site to decrease the size of the paddock, which was quite large when the project started.

The initial project was Caring for Our Country and Landcare funded, and while *EverGraze*® has been involved, Landcare was the main driver until this year.

We have now taken on the Site as an official *EverGraze* Supporting Site.

The aim is to increase groundcover on the north-west face while increasing utilisation on the south face. The north-west face is mostly bare during summer, and dominated by capeweed during the growing season. Small tufts of wallaby grass are scattered across the north face. Microlaena patches are evident in wetter areas further down the slope. The strategy for the north slope is to include it in a rotational grazing system with rests of between 30 days during spring and 60 days during autumn and winter to

increase the strength of the perennial component.

A heavy graze during early spring controls capeweed before removing stock between November and the autumn break to allow native grasses to seed and germinate. This method should work for wallaby grass, which likes bare ground to germinate, and microlaena on the lower slopes, which likes to germinate with a bit of cover.

No phosphorus fertiliser is being applied to the north face to reduce the competitiveness of the capeweed compared with the native grasses. The aim is to maintain above 70 per cent groundcover throughout the year.

On the southern slopes, groundcover is maintained mostly by perennial ryegrass. The sheep did not utilise this area while the north-west slope was in the same paddock because it is cold and the pasture lost quality as it became rank. By dividing the two aspects, the sheep are forced to graze the southerly slope, hopefully increasing utilisation and feed quality. The group intends to do some feed tests to determine

differences in feed quality on the northerly and southerly faces of the hill. This might help to determine why we see preferential grazing and whether productivity is penalised by forcing the sheep to graze there.

The southerly slope can be grazed in the rotation system year-round due to the high groundcover. Using this area during early autumn can help create a feed wedge on areas more suitable for autumn lambing as the weather gets colder. Further increases in feed quality may be achieved if Terry fertilised his southerly slopes to encourage clover. However, the economics of doing this would be worth investigating.

- **Kate Sargeant is a pasture agronomist with the Department of Primary Industries Victoria.**

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