PREPARING WITH HINDSIGHT

Reflections of real farmers from before, during & after drought

SOUTHERN NSW
Innovation Hub
SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITIES

LOCATION
Pulletop | NSW

OWNER/OPERATORS INTERVIEWED
Geoff & Tim Roberts

PROPERTY SIZE
1,600ha

ENTERPRISES
Beef cattle (70%); Sheep (20%) and Cropping

INTRODUCTION

The Roberts' family operate a mixed farming enterprise between Holbrook and Wagga Wagga. Rainfall is variable, with an annual average around 600mm. The farm is predominantly self –replacing beef cattle, along with a self-replacing flock of sheep for wool and prime lamb production. Summer crops include millet, forage sorghum, turnips and kale. Perennial pastures are favoured, taking advantage of any rainfall.

The Roberts' have been using silage as a valuable drought resilience tool for decades. They have developed their operation to the point where there storage capacity for up to 5,000 bales equivalent.

> *We innovate and try different things*

Running a farm business has many challenges, which presently for the family includes the high cost of inputs, particularly fuel and fertiliser. The cost of silage plastic has doubled in recent times.

Ensuring the farm is in a position to function during drought is integral to their operation, and practices that facilitate being as prepared as possible are integrated into all aspects of the enterprise.

Key is having an overall farm plan set within a five-, 10- and 20-year strategic plans. Having an open mind to new ideas, technology and innovation, and adapting where and when necessary, also plays an important part in their long-term viability and profitability.

EXPERIENCE OF DROUGHT & BUILDING RESILIENCE

Over 2018/19 there was a big reduction in rainfall measured, and although there was some summer rain, other factors impacted the growing season including high temperatures, excessive wind and late frosts. The impact of the dry years was mitigated to some extent by the level of preparation the family had put in place. Infrastructure improvements especially for grain storage and water security, silage reserves and improved pastures were key elements

They also adopted measures to assist with efficiency in feed distribution and labour during the drought, such as a modified feed cart with large capacity. The millennium drought demonstrated that you can't have too much in reserve, when many dry years necessitated buying in feed to retain their breeding stock, costing around $10,000 a week.

Encouragement/incentives to boost infrastructure and preparedness in good times, which will also be a boost to local economies, are important

Drought support measures need to be simple and straightforward. Programs such as the current instant asset write-off in primary production are the type of measure that should be ongoing, they believe.

> *We had about 3,000 bales put away, and what saved us was having quality feed, and good water ... You really have to be prepared*

Examples that would make a difference to their business include incentives to keep high quality feed that can be stored for 10 years or more; and for work on vital infrastructure such as dams that they complete themselves (in 2018/19 they were frustrated at being ineligible for rebates in cleaning out their own dams).

> *Incentives to prepare your farm and help yourself are tremendous assistance*

> *The better prepared you are the less likely you need to call on assistance, its important (to recognise) when people want to help themselves*

Silage plays a key role in the Roberts' strategic planning. They have invested in equipment to dig their own silage pits.

INNOVATION AND ADOPTING NEW PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO DROUGHT

Sound preparation ensured the Roberts' maintained the nucleus of their cattle through the drought, vital to retaining genetics and breeding stock, and providing the impetus for strong recovery post drought. This again underlines the value of fodder on hand - not being forced to offload valuable stock that have taken years to build up and would be a difficult and costly exercise to replace.

Silage is a critical component of their operation, and where significant developments have taken place

They aim to put away 1,500 to 2,000 bales a year, dependant on what the season allows. Last season they were able to get 5,000 bales in the ground.

Silage has proven to not only be a key drought reserve for their own livestock, but an added income stream in on selling in times of high demand. Having quality fodder on hand ensures the Roberts' can maintain a continuity of supply with buyers, and finish cattle off to a premium price, giving significant advantage over selling as store stock.

> ***We plan and think a lot ahead, making sure we have put enough away for the following season as well.***

INNOVATION AND ADOPTING NEW PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO DROUGHT

They have doubled their silage holding capacity since the drought

The family invested in machinery to dig the pits themselves, and also take care of the time critical process to cut, rake and bale. Good preparation and quality product going into the ground ensures a quality product comes out when needed.

Being prepared: quality bales go into silage pits to ensure quality feed when needed.

Other resilience measures they have undertaken include a lot of work on increasing both the storage capacity of existing dams and building more, to bolster water security. This investment was carried out mainly in the years following the millennium drought, with more dams built throughout the property.

They have also ensured good provision for stock of shade and shelter, and silo infrastructure for increased grain storage.

The Roberts' have continued to modernise and develop their farming systems

This has been a key factor in drought preparedness and mitigation, and includes minimum till farming, with direct drilling for moisture and soil preservation. They have a lot of interest in research and trialling of perennial pasture varieties.

Being prepared: quality bales go into silage pits to ensure quality feed when needed.
A particular area of interest, and one in which they would like to see more research and extension, is pasture species that have stood the test of time.

> ***We still have some pastures sown in the 1960's that look and perform better (than some more recent introductions) - it would be good to have a closer look at those species that have lasted the distance. How do blocks sown decades ago compare with today's?***

THE FUTURE ... AND WHAT ROLE CAN THE SNSW HUB PLAY

Geoff and Tim are strong advocates of supporting Australian manufacturing and industry.

> *Whenever we can we buy Australian made and support local businesses*

This has also led to collaboration over the years between themselves and manufacturers, to refine machinery for a particular task including trialling on farm for a practical perspective.

Given the role innovation and initiative plays in their own enterprise, Geoff and Tim believe this is a key area in which the SNSW Hub can support agriculture into the future. The involvement of organisations such as FSG's, LLS, DPI are all integral to further learning and distribution of valuable resources and information.

Research and Extension specific to particular areas is essential to cater to the many different needs of the region, with outcomes delivered in a relevant and practical way. From their own perspective, this could include subjects such as growing perennial pastures on the less fertile ridge and hilly country; varieties that stand up to rust and aphids; or are long and strong performers.

Relating to and learning from peers is one of the best resources for education and advancement, such as case studies and demonstrations.

> *Promote and support farmer interaction and case studies. It is important to see things in action*

It was suggested that people be engaged as to what they are most interested in learning about... and that feedback could help guide areas to be targeted

> *But also include something different, or that only one person might have suggested, that all helps people to think outside the box*

Promoting and collaborating with local industry is a way they suggested the SNSW Hub could help foster innovation. As a multi-generational farming family, they believe there needs to be stronger emphasis on the development of young people on the land. They think the Hub could play a role in facilitating resources and training for young people; courses that help with relevant and practical skills. These factors are also important to an overall community perspective, mindful of the significant impact drought has on rural businesses and towns.

Geoff highlighted some areas he feels are of particular concern to the future of agriculture, including the growing problem with wild dogs migrating into grazing areas from the mountains. He also believes a big risk to the agriculture and horticultural industry is illegal and potentially diseased plant and animal products coming into Australia.

> *Border patrol is doing a good job but it's almost too late when it hits Australia, and the fines can be small and insignificant*

THE FUTURE ... AND WHAT ROLE CAN THE SNSW HUB PLAY

Another big challenge is weed control, with the spread of blackberry in the hills an issue of concern

> ***There is a lot of it around, and it's taking a lot of time and money to try and control... more needs to be done***

Making that preparedness most effective in this era is by having an ongoing interest and uptake in innovation and practices to support drought resilience and long-term profitability.

For this farming family, being well prepared for drought is a key component of their operation, and something that has been embraced through generations.

> ***It is what I have done all my life, being well prepared like my father before me***

The Pulletop area is home to the Roberts' family 1,600 ha farming operation, including beef cattle, sheep and cropping.

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PREPARING WITH HINDSIGHT

Preparing with Hindsight was a community engagement project conducted by Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub partner - the Farming Systems Group Alliance – consisting of FarmLink Research, Central West Farming Systems, Riverine Plains, Southern Growers, Irrigated Cropping Council, Irrigation Research and Extension Committee and Holbrook Landcare Group. The project resulted in the collection of experiences of a range of landholders through the stages of pre-drought, in drought and drought recovery from the 2018/19 event. It will contribute to the Hub's focus on working with farmers and communities to identify how we can increase our resilience to drought. A series of seven case studies was created as a part of the engagement project.

This project received funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund.

Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Future Drought Fund

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