

sustainable
agriculture



Rehabilitating salt land for greater purpose



Project Snapshot

Land Manager Names:	Keith and Sandie O'Brien Tim Fleay and Family
Property Size:	1200 ha 3000 ha
Location:	Wickepin shire
Annual Rainfall (mm):	400 mm
Enterprise Mix:	Cropping and livestock
Soil Types/Vegetation Types:	Shallow clays to duplex loams

Key Messages

- Landcare projects have greater impact if done at a catchment level.
- Saltland can be transformed into productive agricultural land.
- Becoming part of a grower group can help support your business.

This project is supported by Wheatbelt NRM, through funding from the Australian Government's Caring for our Country.

Project delivery through a grower group

Facey Group is a community based farm productivity group that also encourages the integration of natural resource management activities on farm to protect and enhance nature based assets. The Facey Group always try to have their 'finger on the pulse' so they can continue to provide a vital link between funding providers and landholders in their region. When they heard about Caring for our Country funding being delivered through Wheatbelt NRM they forwarded the information onto their grower membership.

Five willing participants put their names forward wanting to plant saltbush on their properties and so this formed the basis of their application. Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator, Sarah Hyde said, "By involving several growers in landcare activities we have a better opportunity to improve the health of the greater catchment. Government funded incentives can increase the scale of works and allow them to be achieved within just a short period". The group's application was granted and in 2010 they were given approximately 48,000 Old Man saltbush (*Atriplex. nummularia*) and 12,000 River saltbush (*Atriplex. amnicola*) to divide between the growers.

The rehabilitation process

Below, the ground works of two of the growers are discussed in detail. Wheat and sheep farmer Keith O'Brien runs Lambton Downs a 1,200 ha property north of Wickepin. In 2010 he machine planted 10,000 Old Man saltbush and 6,000 River saltbush in a low lying area where a salt patch had been encroaching into the paddock. "I wanted to reduce erosion and offer the soil some protection from the wind", Keith said. Similarly, Tim Fleay runs a mixed farming enterprise at Mannafield a 3,000 ha property along the Yealering Rd north of Wickepin. He machine planted 10,000 Old Man saltbush along the edge of a paddock that had long been exposed to water erosion and had turned saline. "I wanted to be able to increase groundcover on the saline section of my paddock and make it productive", Tim explained. Three years after the start of the project and after some infill (1,520 saltbush at O'Brien's and 8,000 saltbush at Fleay's) due to drought conditions, the

growers started to realise the benefits the saltbush was having on farm productivity. Keith explained, "At first I just wanted to stabilise the soil and get some cover back on the paddock. Since the saltbush is quick growing, I now also have shelter for the stock and an alternative source of stock feed for my sheep". He added, "It's like having a virtual haystack". Tim reiterated Keith's sentiment saying, "This salt land management tool [saltbush] has turned previous wasteland into productive land".

Reflecting on the experience

Through their networks the Facey Group have been able to extend the experiences of the participating growers with the broader membership. In 2012 they had a bus tour visiting all the sites and for those that couldn't attend they were treated to case studies via the group's newsletter. Sarah noted, "Keith O'Brien's earnest participation in the project was clear and he promoted the use of saltbush as a productivity tool to other growers." In addition she said, "The Fleay's have astutely recognised that each feature of the landscape can offer unique farm productivity outcomes. The family has a long history of landcare works particularly in the management of saline landscapes". Keith indicated that he would definitely like to apply for a bigger project of the same nature having extensive valley flats and degraded drainage lines across the farm. "The recent plantings have enabled me to increase my sheep enterprise to 50%", Keith said. The only thing the O'Brien's feel they would do differently next time is to modify seedling width. "I feel the seedlings were planted too close and in hindsight would use a spacing that ensures stock can manoeuvre between plants". The Fleay's had initially left their saltbush plantings unfenced but have since decided to fence them for improved grazing management. Tim mentioned, "Isolation of soil types and site specific features [salinity] makes management of paddocks easier". He also acknowledged that without family support a mass planting like theirs would be difficult. Tim plans to plant more saltbush and recommends locally sourced seedling where possible. "Seedling quality is also a very important requirement as it helps the project get away on a positive note".

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