

Road to Regenerative Agriculture

CASE STUDY

Donna Picton | Mitchell's Paddock | 100 acres

In October 2020, Donna and her partner moved from Perth to Yackandandah, scaling up from 16 to 100 acres. Being relatively new to life on the land, Donna's main goal was caring for it – while building an ecologically-conscious equine and tourism business in the long term.

I want to learn how to manage horse grazing and hay farming to maximise stocking rates, maintain healthy horses and improve the overall health of the land under my stewardship. We moved from 16 acres to 100 acres and am desperate to do right by it.

Project goals

Donna's main focus was landscape function, supporting the animals in her care while improving the overall health of the property.

I'm a greenie. I'm in this magical place. I want to minimise the harm I do for the sake of this place and the planet.

Rotational grazing, weed control, water retention, fertiliser and other property improvements will be integral to improving property health. I would like to develop natural shade and shelter on the property, which currently is completely 100% cleared.

She was familiar with the work of people like Allan Savory and holistic grazing concepts, but preferred to learn through hands-on experience and mentorship as opposed to textbooks.

I knew there was probably a better way of doing it... but that's about all I knew.

Implementation + challenges

Due to a timetable clash, Donna wasn't able to attend Graeme's online sessions regularly, but stayed in the loop via email and dipped back in when she could.

I'm now moving the horses between paddocks about once a month. The paddocks are three to seven acres in size and all the horses are in there at once together. Some paddocks are rested for up to 14 months.



A key challenge became balancing the wellbeing of her horses – valuable competition animals with specific routines and behaviours – against Graeme's teachings and advice. Another factor was the extensive fencing Donna and her partner had only just invested in.

I'm not doing the strip grazing as he [Graeme] has recommended for a few reasons. One because I started the program after we put in a couple of hundred thousand dollars' worth of fencing. And the infrastructure works really well from a horse welfare management point of view. But I've become a lot more formal and structured about when I move and when I rest, and what to look for when resting.

One of the things with horses is that, having them all in a small area there's a lot more argy bargy and herd dynamics. Some of these horses are worth a lot of money so if they get a kick, that could be their career over. Having the space to get away from each other is really important, as is enough space for incidental exercise.

I've cherry-picked the program a little bit because competition horses are a different beast.

Outcomes

While Donna didn't follow Graeme's recommendations to the letter, she describes big changes to her thinking and farming, no longer seeing animals as fundamentally 'bad' for the landscape. As well as that, she became more observant of soil and pasture while saving money on inputs.

The big learning is that it doesn't have to be detrimental to the land. Just the mere fact of having them [the horses] here doesn't mean I'm doing harm.

I've definitely changed practices because of the program. It's about rotating paddocks, and resting them, that's the biggest thing that I've taken away and continue to do.

I used to think it was all about fertilising – from super to worm castings. I've stopped spending a lot of money on that stuff, trusting that it will sort itself out. That's going to be a definite saving.

We changed from a mulcher which left big oxidising windrows everywhere to a slasher.

We've only been on the property for 2.5 years and it was in pretty good condition when we came, and I'd like to think it's still in pretty good condition.

We've done a heap of tree planting, with mixed success. I got a list of area-specific species from the Wodonga Landcare Nursery; hardy shrubs, red wattle, gums, all natives.

I agree with everything he [Graeme] says. Nothing I don't do is because I don't agree with him, it's because I'm slack or prioritising something else.



Project reflections

Donna is happy with how far she's come after 12 months of mentorship and project learnings.

If zero is complete ignorance and ten's the world expert... at the start I was a zero and I've definitely moved up to maybe a three or a four.

As well as shaping her own land management practices, she noticed small but important changes in her local community as she informally shared her Road to Regenerative Agriculture story.

Our neighbours originally said no to the program, they're pretty conventional, but then they actually attended the last workshop with Graeme and it did get them thinking, showing them that there are other ways. A seed has been planted.

It's a wonderful program. Graeme is very knowledgeable and passionate; his manner is fantastic. I'm hugely appreciative of the opportunity to have done it. Everyone should do it!



If you loved reading this regenerative case study, you can find more (including short films) at kclg.org.au. With special thanks to Kiewa Catchment Landcare Group, Graeme Hand (handfortheland.com) and Donna Picton.

