

Road to Regenerative Agriculture

CASE STUDY

Mick & Matt Grogan | Staghorn Flat Farm | 117 acres

Mick and Matt Grogan are a father-son team, participating in the Road to Regenerative Agriculture project alongside partners Clare and Tamsin. With an existing awareness of rotational grazing, they wanted to delve deeper into the theory and application of regenerative practices to restore Matt's 117 acre property in Staghorn Flat. At the same time, Mick implemented Safe to Fail areas at his property near Wangaratta, seeing immediate benefits and amplifying the project's impact.

“We've been interested in trying to improve the soil profile for some time, and improving the planet, really. When we heard about this opportunity we said "this sounds terrific!" and jumped in. It's been a very positive experience and really interesting to hear from other people involved in the project to get their insights into what's happening on their farms. ~ Mick

Project + farm summary

A young family and full time work made participation tricky for Matt, so his father Mick took the lead. Mick attended regular zoom webinars and met with Graeme Hand, bringing learnings and advice back to Staghorn Flat Farm.

We purchased the property in December 2015 after it had been heavily grazed by agisted cattle with fences in disrepair, huge areas of blackberries, lots of established briar rose and increasing gully erosion.

We run cows and calves, selling vealers at 10 months and have produced organic veggies to sell. Our long term vision is for sustainable biodynamic farming, working with nature.

Safe To Fail Areas

They erected a Safe to Fail area and documented the changes after six months and then a year, observing improvements to soil, pasture and livestock.

You can just tell from looking at the cattle that they're healthier, the dung scores are better, the gut fill is better, all those things that Graeme talks about – and that I probably haven't taken much notice of over the years.



66

The evidence is clearly there; it [the safe to fail area] improved markedly.



Safe To Fail
April '21
11 cows + calves
22 m² per animal

More of the native grasses are coming back, and the other thing that was quite surprising was that once we'd actually rested the ground for six months, the cattle got in and ate everything – even what I'd consider weeds. Graeme said it was because the plants were established and the root systems were better, so they [the cattle] wanted to eat it because it's fresh and nutritious.



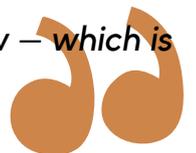
Safe To Fail
October '21
24 cows + 9 vealers
9 m² per animal

Challenges

Matt balances professional and family commitments while Mick continues to work full time as a teacher. This has meant fewer cattles moves and a slower, steadier approach to implementing Graeme's suggestions. But by being realistic about their capacity, focusing on foundational infrastructure and 'playing the long game', the Grogan family has set lifelong sustainable changes in motion.

The key to being efficient is having the right structures in place – and then it becomes a daily chore, but not an onerous one. We're working towards that over the next couple of years.

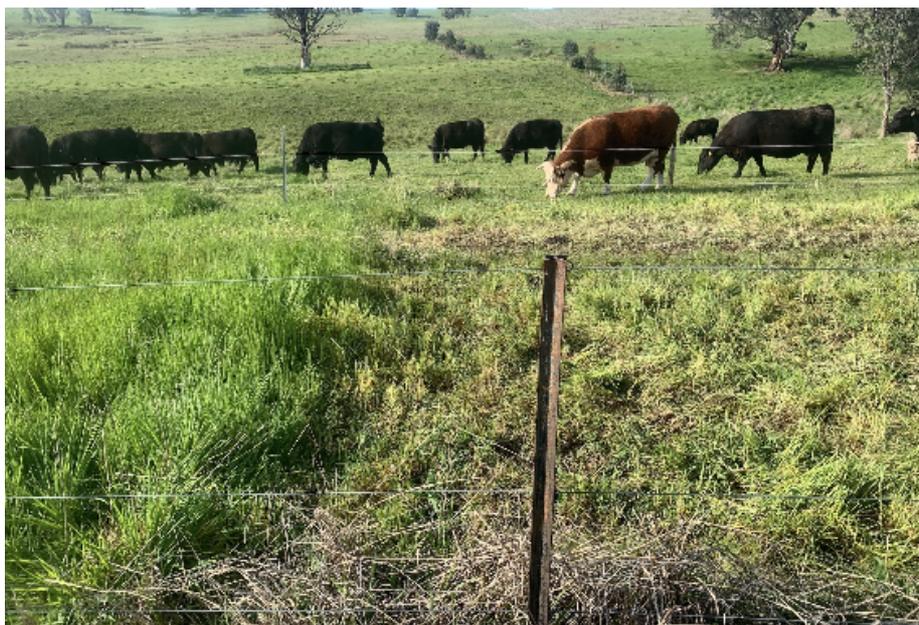
Any sort of development that takes place on your farm, have the long picture in view – which is something we hadn't thought about [before the program].



Reflections

Mick reflects that the project has deepened his understanding of regenerative principles and practices, offering a way to live his values of land care each day in the field.

I wouldn't have had the same insight if it wasn't for Graeme's mentorship, but it has taken a while. Initially I was asking, "How's this going to work Graeme?". He's talking about these fences and this water and in my mind I just couldn't see it. But as it began to unfold, I started to understand where he was coming from – and the case studies he showed me were truly inspirational. Now it's up to us to make it work.



Benefits

Beyond the benefits to land and livestock, Mick highlights how landscape function management has improved their business's bottom line.

The lowering of costs, your input costs, is substantial. You're not relying on fossil fuels for your tractors, for making hay and all those things, and the land is being rewarded because it's not going to be stripped bare in a drought.

Mick has noticed the project's ripple effect, providing a talking point between friends and family and paving the way for broader conversations about climate change.

I've actually spoken to a lot of people [about the project], friends who have smaller properties, and they've been quite interested in the whole thing.

It's called regenerative grazing. It's all about landscape function and improving the soil and improving the vegetation. Focusing on perennials rather than annuals and having a variety of plants.

If you look at the climate crisis, if we continue to use those big tractors to make a whole lot of hay, or plant more seed, and we're doing it over and over and over again, I just can't see that being good for the planet. We've got to approach things differently – and Australia's an extreme place too, with floods and droughts, we can't keep feeding out hay onto bare ground. It's not helping the ground, it's not helping the soil and it's not helping the environment. It's not just the financial costs but the cost to the planet.

Future vision

Mick, Matt and the Grogan family are looking into supplying local butchers with their beef to reduce food miles, while continuing to prioritise landscape function, healthy soil and happy people.

[the program has] ...reinforced that concept of producing good, wholesome beef while reducing the carbon footprint.

There's a push towards grass assured beef; people aren't into the feedlot stuff as much. Consumers want to know where their food comes from.



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 Mick Grogan & family.

