

Beyond the Boundary Fence—Tilbuster Commons

by John King

Ever wondered how to get economies of scale without the costs? Australian researchers have hit on a common sense idea that combines the age old concept of grazing the commons with modern farming through cross property grazing. The benefits to farmers include lower production costs, improved returns through animal performance, and reduced labor.

Dr. David Brunckhorst, Director of the Institute for Rural Futures, spearheaded Tilbuster Commons, a project involving neighboring farming families joining their livestock and grazing them on the land they collectively owned and managed. “That was five years ago,” he says, “and as the success exceeded the expectations of the families involved, they decided to continue the practice long after the initial three year project ended.”

The project involved four families and 3,237 acres (1,300 ha) in the tablelands near Armidale, northern New South Wales. Individual property sizes vary from 150 acres (60 ha) to 1500 acres (600 ha). There is now a similar ‘grazing commons’ project happening near Glenn Innes, northern NSW emerging from a labor-sharing scheme that will now involve mixed livestock grazing. The project drew inspiration from previous research in South Australia where 30 farmers and other landholders collectively managed some 3,475 square miles (9,000 square km) to start to regenerate land from salination across property boundaries, while experimenting with new more viable industries and practices.

“For the families involved, it was important that they would be no worse off financially, but hopefully do a little better, while freeing up time and labor and improving and looking after the environment are equally high values held by all,” says Brunckhorst. Initially, the four families made formal arrangements including setting up their own company and formal meetings to discuss the operational arrangements. Each family has shares based on the agreed value of the land and livestock and receive profits through dividends. “The big issue,” as Brunckhorst describes, “was the ability to enforce the collective perspective by clear rules of decision making based on agreed values and goals. This reduces individual rationales leading us off the track, but does not at all squash individual input—from all ages.” This clarity of shared vision articulated in their holistic goal has allowed the management team to test their decisions toward the outcome they want. Likewise, this collective process has helped the management team grow in their trust and acceptance of each others’ strengths and weaknesses.

As Brunckhorst points out, “Farming families naturally focus on their own situation, but for cross property grazing to work, families had to look beyond their boundary to the bigger picture across all the properties involved. Decisions are made for the best interest of the company, versus each family’s self interest. For example, all the paddocks are supplied water from the one dam.” Likewise, alternative stock water is obtained from a number of different sources across the commons and piped in the most cost-effective manner across the land-title boundaries. In this way the combined resources allows the management team to compete at a larger scale economy.

The big picture perspective resulted in an interesting behavior. Families became more proactive in managing the grazing company than they had been on their own farm businesses. For example, upon working together, families made the decision to cut stock numbers earlier when drought loomed.

Previously, families delayed this kind of decision when managing their own operations. Brunckhorst believes this change in risk management behavior comes from a deep desire to work together resulting from the mutual support each family provides one another and a reluctance to let one another down.

This communal spirit has strengthened over the years as their confidence in managing common land has grown. Family members now freely access each other’s properties, and increasingly operational meetings happen informally in the paddock of the property grazing the stock rather than at board meetings around a table.

More Profit, Less Labor

The most significant saving has been in labor, time, and quality of life. As Brunckhorst points out, “The labor contribution of each family is determined by the size of their property. Essentially the larger the property, the more time the animals spend there. Yet the overall labor demands for each family dropped allowing time for pursuing family interests and environmental projects.”

The Tilbuster Commons Company leases land from each property so everyone knows and contributes to the development of the grazing plan. The group has developed maps to plan grazing routes and determine how animal behavior can be employed to regenerate the landscape. Using holistic planned grazing rather than rotational grazing has meant families can have animals in the right place, at the right time for the right reason and improve land use efficiency. Such a change has eliminated the need to crop for winter feed which also reduces labor.

Putting all the cattle in one mob had immediate benefits for the group. It improved the calving rate, allowed them to pull through drought easier, increased soil cover to the degree that water quality improved by 300 percent because of better infiltration. Cattle numbers float from 220 to 400 head with the animals taking anywhere from 90 days to 230 days to graze around the four properties. The stock policy is to run slight higher numbers and sell at lighter weights as this gives better returns both financially and environmentally.

The long pasture recovery times have allowed the native grasses to return and flourish, one of the aims of the original project. As a result pasture renovation costs have drastically reduced as well as the need for winter grazing crops. The financial returns for the families has been around 10 percent above what they were achieving individually and heading towards 20 percent now that they have full organic certification for the Company and all properties. Six years of drought—the worst beyond all records—has seriously influenced profitability and degradation on local farms, but Tilbuster Commons has weathered the drought while maintaining good ground cover and profitability.

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