

Regenerating the land they know

By Chelsea Ashmeade

Succession planning on the farm planted the seed for soil regeneration and increasing plant species for Tracy and Owen Bonython.

Tracy is a fourth generation farmer and with the support of husband Owen, and their two young children, they're slowly implementing change for the future.

Their successful goat business, Bon Chevon, has also seen a benefit from adding plant species diversity to the soils they graze.

With about 1000ac, plus 1500ac of leased land, Tracy helps to manage the farm - still largely owned by her parents.

As parents to young children, they began to question what they were feeding them and what was going into the meat of their goats, as well as the sustainability of their farm long-term.

"I think that's where the regeneration hit home for us," Tracy said.

Their first introduction was through Gabe Brown's book 'Dirt to Soil' and with the help of Director of NewTech Minerals, Greg Barr they started to experiment with their goat paddocks.

"...we knew we had to look at the soils..."
- Tracy Bonython

"(we) Talked about chemical use and high synthetic use. From there we started a relationship with Greg looking at soils and did a heap of soil testing, we also looked at ani-



Tracy and Owen Bonython, of Ebenezer, and their children Chelsea and Blake are committed to regenerating the soil, adding additional plant species and are already seeing positive outcomes.

mal health, moving to a natural organic drench (just for the goats at present) and mineral licks - we were really looking at improving gut and probiotic health but, we knew we had to look at the soils. We looked at restorer blends and what we were missing in our soils. That's when the multi species conversation happened and we went down that path."

As a successful recipient of an Ag Bureau Scholarship, Tracy had

some funds leftover in 2017 and wanted to learn more about pastures, so they set up their first trial in 2017/18.

This trial continued to fuel the want to make change.

Fast forward to 2020 and with a good rain event (60mm) at harvest, the couple decided to put a cover crop in, which was predominantly millet with the addition of forage brassica.

"It came up about a foot, we

Going all-in with a cover crop

were really impressed with what it achieved,” Owen said.

Tracy said they then went an all-in winter 2021 mix which included oats, barley, peas, lentils, cereal, rye, triticale, wheat and lupins.

The cover crops have been planted at their home paddocks where they run about 250 goats (at the peak) across three areas - 15ha in total was planted with those species.

“Late April, before the season broke, we dry sowed the multispecies mix. Then, as soon as we could graze it, we put goats on it and we kept rotating the goats across the paddocks, until they kidded out in October at our best kidding to date.” Tracy said.

A week before they were due to kid, Tracy said they pulled the does out of those paddocks and moved them into their kidding area.

“We saw really good numbers and they kidded out really well,” she said.

“They grew out to be pretty specy little animals.”

While they are restricted by not owning a disc seeder, Tracy and Owen can see how the benefits of using one would help their soils continue to improve.

“We really hoped to get a disc seeder to turn things straight over, to keep the live roots in there and keep everything ticking along,” Tracy said.

“Having that cover on the ground, it’s really an important thing - keeping microbes alive and keeping them happy. At this point, we just don’t quite have that option available.”

Winter crop 2022 will see the Bonython’s team up with Barossa Improved Grazing Group to work on a



The first grazing of last year’s mixed species (winter). All photos supplied.

–trial together.

“We will use a paddock that’s never had multi-species on it before,” Tracy said.

This particular paddock will have a knockdown herbicide for potato weed applied and they will seed alternate strips of multi-species and Moby Barley in an east-west fashion.

“We hope to then fence off and graze in a north-south direction and observe what happens. It will be interesting to see what they (the goats) do.”

Other crop mixes they have sown include millet, buster radish, chicory, sunflowers and phalaris - a mix they put together through the local farming store.

“We asked what they had and they just threw these at us, we did it at all different rates.”

Throughout the process of trialling different mixes and seed combinations, Tracy said they would work closely with Greg Barr, Jim Seamer (of AJ Products) and Anthony Pearce (from Hills Farm Supplies).

“We will probably go through An-

Unlocking what's in the soil

thony for the other multi-species that we don't have. We are looking at herbs and other varieties; not just grasses, brassicas and broad-leaf. A mix that's good for grazing."

By adding diversity to their soils and giving their herd of goats variety, the Bonython's hope to not only give their land the help it needs but also continue the positive results for their animals.

"We want to unlock our minerals and microbes and are doing a lot of soil testing at the moment," Tracy said.

"Often we have got large amounts of calcium, or large amounts of phosphorus but it's all locked up and not available for the plant and that's when we spread lime or gypsum and while that works, you have to continue to do that.

"By adding a restorer blend and doing the practices we want to do, we are hoping to increase the fertility of the soil to unlock it for the plants."

They've already seen positive results within their goat herd but they've also seen added beneficial bugs.

"We have dung beetles, we've never seen them before. It makes you go, maybe we are on the right track here," Tracy said.

"...we are hoping to increase the fertility of the soil..."

While regeneration and plant species diversity is relatively new for the Bonython family they've been open-minded about the process and feel it's the way forward.



Above: Kidding success and rates increased when the Bonythons added mixed plant species to their paddocks and, below: Left of the fence is the 2021 winter species grazed by goats and to the right of the fenceline not yet grazed.



They know there's a long way to go in changing not only their soils but also the mindsets of those around them.

"People's acceptance of something different has been a big hurdle, but one of our biggest hurdles will be our mindset and blocking the opinion of others."

"People are wanting to see a quick result, but we can't change this overnight. We also have to be profitable as well. We can't just go gung ho, it just doesn't work that way."

Whilst it will be a slow rollout the family feels they are on the right track and with some of the best kidding they've seen to date, they feel it's already making a difference.

"A big game changer will be getting a disc seeder," Owen said.

It's all still in the early stages but Tracy and Owen both said they're enjoying and having fun on the farm again.

"I have fun with my job; you know you are doing something good when that's the case," she said.

How it all began for Tracy and Owen

Tracy is a fourth generation farmer at their property, located at Ebenezer in South Australia's Barossa Valley.

Her grandmother's uncle, a bachelor, passed the farm to her, which was then handed down to Tracy's father - who has been on the property for about 57 years - and now they are starting the process of succession planning.

"...I really worked out that I wanted to come back to the farm," - Tracy said.

After school Tracy went off and studied teaching, specialising in agriculture studies, but always felt the desire to come home to the farm.

Throughout the years Tracy said they've always rotated cereal crops, have an established vineyard, sheep and cattle. Most recently though,



Increasing plant species diversity has been an important step in managing the goat paddocks where Tracy and Owen Bonython keep their herd of 250.

through her teaching and involvement with the schools' competition at the Royal Adelaide Show, she and Owen have added goats to their enterprise.

"In 2013 I took a 12-month gap from teaching.

"This was the year I really worked out that I wanted to come back to the farm," Tracy said.

"I went back to teaching part time in 2014, and worked on the farm a couple days a week. That year

I found it hard to source goats for the students for the wether competition at the show."

The same year, she decided to purchase 10 goats to breed for Faith Lutheran College and it "snowballed from there".

Bon Chevon was born and the goat stud has continued to flourish.

Increasing plant species diversity has aided in their success also and the family looks forward to what it brings in years to come.



The Bonythons have seen an increase in successful kidding from their herd of goats following the implementation of increasing plant species diversity.

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