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Agribusiness

CASE STUDY:

Tom's Paddock Pastured Eggs

As part of the Regenerative Agriculture project undertaken in conjunction with Deakin University, five best practice case studies were developed based on interviews with regenerative agriculture practitioners.





Background

Tom's Paddock is a pastured egg enterprise established in 2012 that operates as a stacked business on the family farm, 'Graceburn' in Glenburn Victoria. It is owned and operated separately by the next generation to the existing enterprise on the farm, which is a beef breeding enterprise of 30 commercial Devon breeders. Despite being operated separately, both enterprises are run in synergy with each other.

The property has been owned by the Abbot-Smith family since the late 1960's. In keeping with the farming practices of the time, the land was cleared and sown down to Victorian ryegrass and subterranean clover. The family ran beef cattle on this country for many years. Unusual for the time, key parts of the farm adjacent to Kinglake National Park were left uncleared and retained for biodiversity values.

Fast Facts

Owner/Business:

Tom Abbot-Smith-Youl and Sally Abbott-Smith
Tom's Paddock

Key Farm Outputs:

Pastured eggs and beef

Age:

34 years and 70 years

Generation:

2nd & 3rd generation

Location:

Glenburn, Goulburn Region, Victoria

Size of farm:

130ha freehold

Established:

1960 – Beef Cattle; 2012 – Chickens (layers)

Employment:

One person full time, two people casual (total 1.5 FTE)

Rainfall:

728.4mm (100 year average)

Soil Type:

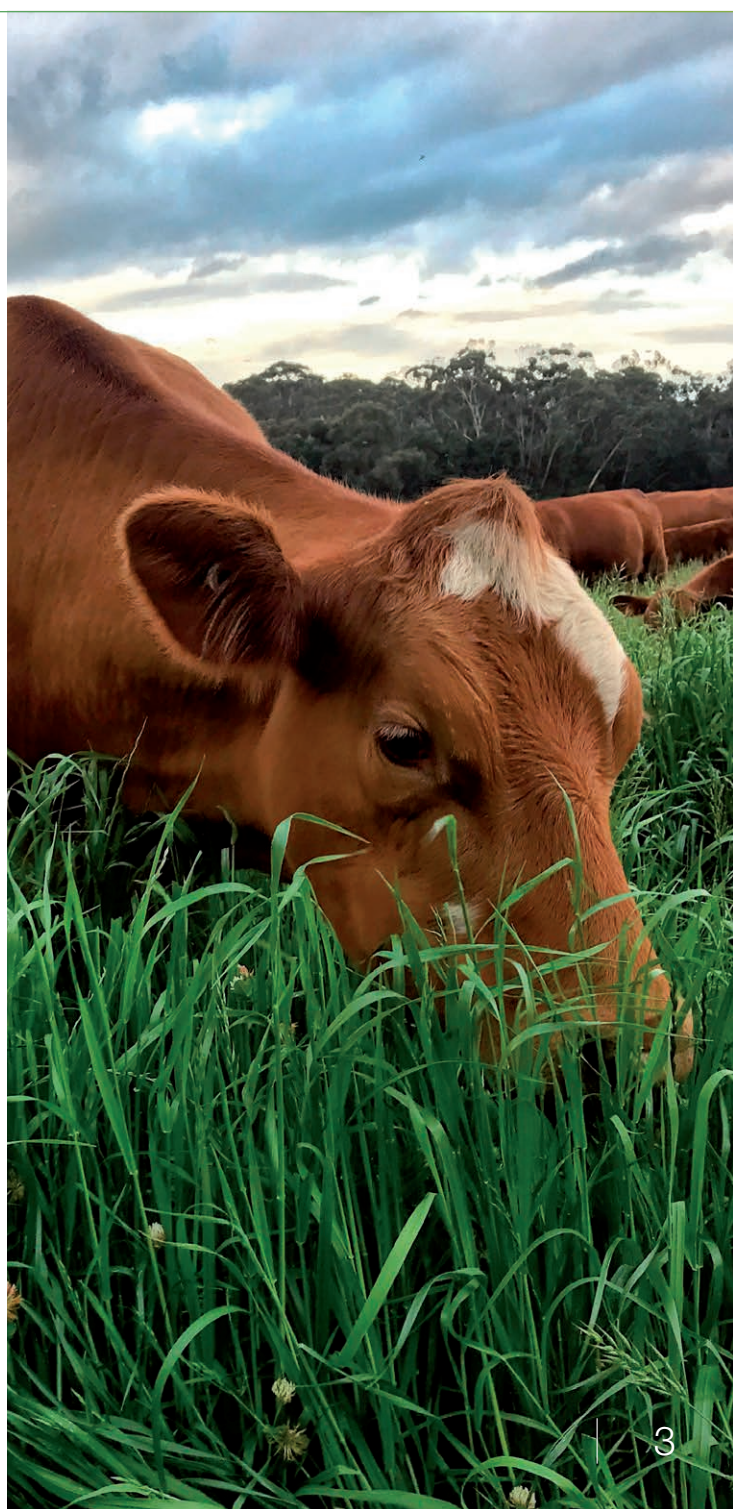
Devonian Clay / Colluvial

Land Tenure:

Freehold

Key Markets:

Beef – livestock exchange; Eggs – cafes, restaurants and buying clubs



Need for change

In 1996 the farm was taken over by Sally's generation of the family. This change of generation allowed for a change of management and focus away from a traditional, synthetic fertilizer-based approach to soil health towards a new way of thinking – a more sustainable, and then regenerative approach. This included no additional synthetic fertilizer inputs after this time, although rock phosphate and lime has been introduced. Tom and Sally note that:

“During this early stage of weaning the farm off synthetic fertilisers, the introduction of active rock phosphate made us feel like we were doing something towards our soil health. The Olsen P on the property is still generally low, but our operation has moved more towards grazing management, soil cover and diverse, native dominant pastures rather than pushing up chemical soil analysis figures”

“We now focus on understanding and being sympathetic to the idea ecosystems have been evolving for eons and are good at what they do. We work with and support ecosystem functions that favour agricultural productivity, with our key focus being on promoting soil biological life and maximizing the carbon cycle.”



Innovative approach

"I was finishing my engineering degree at university and, after being based in Melbourne for the duration of my studies, I really wanted to go home and work on the farm, but the traditional farming model didn't provide the income for me to be employed on the family farm, and more land to expand the cattle business was too expensive"

Tom's Paddock was one of the first pastured egg businesses in Victoria and immediately found a ready market in local and Melbourne based cafes, restaurants and buying clubs.

"The inspirational moment was when we heard from a Virginian farmer, Joel Salatin, at a local event. He described the concept of stacking enterprises and also the model of small scale, pastured egg production. I could see that the idea had real potential for us at the farm."

"People want to know where their food is coming from and feel like they are being responsible in their food choices. This gave them that opportunity."

The other inspirational practitioner on the Abbott-Smith farm is Graeme Hand.

"Graeme introduced us to planned rotational grazing and holistic grazing management. This has become a key management tool on the farm, with rapid rotations of both cattle and chickens being a key part of maintaining ground cover and building soil carbon and health."

"I am now working on the farm full time, which gives us greater opportunities to enhance the property in a variety of ways, such as biodiversity enhancement, which involves tree planting and fencing out remnant vegetation. We have almost 50% of the property dedicated for biodiversity, with only 65 Ha used for pastures. 40% of the property is protected by a Trust for Nature covenant."

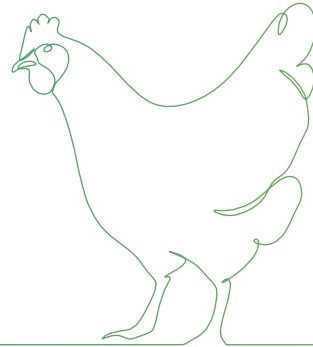


Certification

“We have not gone down the track of certification as we foster a close relationship with our customers. We try to tell our story through social media as well as face to face. We run tours and school excursions at the farm too, to help educate people about regenerative agriculture and show them firsthand how our farm runs.”



Operational Information



Local Government Authority:

Murrindindi Shire

Planning Controls:

Farming Zone (FZ); Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO); Areas of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Sensitivity (Waterways); Adjacent to Public Conservation and Recreation Zone (PCRZ) (Kingleake National Park).

Percentage of land utilized:

50 percent

Percentage of land for biodiversity:

50 percent utilised (40 percent under covenant)

Proportion of income:

100 percent

Pasture base:

Native with some improved species.

Marketing approach:

Beef Cattle- agent and livestock; Eggs- social media (primarily Instagram), direct customer contact, website and occasional markets.

Volunteer use:

Limited – occasionally family members.

Open to public:

By appointment and occasional events.

Farming framework:

Regenerative agriculture practitioner; Stacked enterprise (Salatin) (10 years); Agroecology; Holistic Grazing Management; Biodiversity conservation (Trust for Nature Covenant) (60 years).

Certification (eg. Organic):

N/A

Transitioned (year):

1996

Other products (household):

Fruit and vegetables, geese, harvested wild deer.

Question and Answer

Q. What benefits have you found in a regenerative approach to farming?

A. *The farm has transformed over the years. Cape weed used to be a dominant species on the property. This has almost completely gone from the pastures now. Nutrients are more evenly distributed across the farm. Ground cover is always maintained and there is greater diversity of more desirable species in the pastures. The pasture used to be like a bowling green, now we grow significantly more grass. Previously we were less prepared for seasonal drops in feed production. With the use of planned grazing and feed budgeting, we are in a position to make better management decisions.*

It's hard to explain, but it feels nicer to be working the farm. We are more in control, we feel more prepared and we are more connected socially. The farm operates more in line with the ethics and community we want to be a part of.

Q. What have been your biggest farming challenges?

A. *Always more to do and the livestock is a responsibility and tie to the property that makes it difficult to get a break.*

Getting out there and talking to people about the business and selling product is an important part of the business, but it doesn't come naturally to a lot of farmers. Most of us aren't good at all aspects of the business but we have to try to be. It needs us to push ourselves out of our comfort zones.

It can be difficult to maintain friendships and relationships when the business is so demanding.

Q. What has been your biggest farming achievement?

A. *I'm really proud of starting the egg enterprise from scratch with little local examples to look to. We have won several awards for our innovative approach including Landcare and the Regional Innovation Award.*

I really enjoy inspiring young people about farming and their food system. We have several schools that have excursions on the farm and you can see that they are truly engaged and excited.

Q. What are the biggest industry challenges faced by yourself and other producers?

A. *We need farming to grow and change. The older generation tends to be risk adverse. We need young people to be involved in farming so they can lead that change.*

Cutting through misinformation about farming systems and the impact of consumption choices. Paying a fair price for a product that is produced regeneratively means that the farmer earns a fair living for a labour-intensive system which benefits the farm.

Q. What have been your biggest business challenges?

A. *Penetrating an existing market with a differentiated product based on regenerative agriculture, animal welfare and soil health. Traditionally produced eggs are financially cheap, but environmentally expensive.*

Although there was an international example of the enterprise, the model has to be adapted to Australian conditions with limited support.

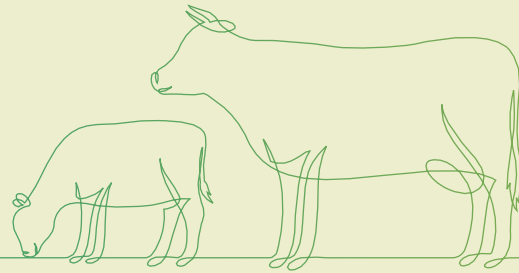
Q. What has been your biggest business achievement?

A. *The egg enterprise has always been in positive growth and has enabled a third generation to remain on farm and derive an income.*

Waste reduction actions, including the use of plastic reusable trays and reusable cartons.

Q. Who have been your mentors?

A. *Joel Salatin, Graeme Hand, Pete the Permie, Sally and previous generations of the family*



Q. What have been your most influential texts?

A. *The Shear Ecstasy of being a Lunatic Farmer*
Joel Salatin.

Q. What action could local government take to support regenerative agriculture?

A. *Facilitate information flow about local food systems and supporting local food through education.*

Planning needs to be more supportive and look at how approvals can be given for innovative farming approaches.

Communal processing and distribution facilities.

Employ officers that have an understanding of regenerative agriculture, so they are better placed to offer farmers support.

Greater action on climate change.

Q. What action could state government take to support regenerative agriculture?

A. *Clarity in policy direction on what we want food production and food security in Victoria to look like.*

Small Artisanal grants were great, but more is needed to support these smaller businesses.

Lack of support or consistency regarding innovation in the processing of animal products. PrimeSafe is too black and white, and not scalable in their approach. Inconsistency between state regulations.

Mobile on farm processing needs to be facilitated and red tape cut.

Q. What actions have you taken to increase your climate resilience?

A. *All aspects of our farming system aim to increase terrestrial carbon, whether that be soil carbon or in trees and plants. This increases water holding capacity of our soils, which lengthens the growing season and supports us through drier*

times seasonally.

Through holistic grazing management, we not only sequester carbon in soils, but also produce more nutrient dense food. It is the most sustainable form of protein production. Industrial farming systems deplete the soil carbon and produce nutrient deficient foods, so we are not being fed properly.

This terrestrial carbon in native vegetation also supports climate resilience of native fauna and flora through the creation of bio linkages and wildlife corridors ensuring plants and animals can move through the landscape as the climate changes.

Local food available to local people enhances food security and food sovereignty in times of change.

Carbon neutrality is the long-term aim with reduced use of fossil fuels, increase use of solar and renewables and we are also looking at methods for reducing methane production in cattle.

Q. Why do you do what you do?

A. *In my mind, there is no alternative. We want to be a part of the solution. How will we continue to feed ourselves with an increasing population and reducing resources? We need to address animal welfare and environmental responsibility whilst providing people with a nutrient rich diet. Regenerative agriculture is the way to do this.*

Q. What are your plans for the future?

A. *We want to build the farming businesses and be an example of financially viable farming that is environmentally conscious. We would also like to look towards on-farm processing of beef in the future as well as other forms of diversification, such as tree crops and silviculture.*



What is Holistic Planned Grazing?

Holistic Planned Grazing is part of the tool kit of the broader management approach developed by Allan Savory known as Holistic Management.

Allan grew up in Zimbabwe and has a background in both ecology and rangeland management as well as military and political experience through the 60's and 70's during the Rhodesian Civil War. These experiences have combined to give him a unique understanding of the landscape coupled with military discipline and planning approaches that have evolved into Holistic Management.

Holistic Planned Grazing changes the livestock managers focus from the animal to the landscape. It considers how to use the impact of grazing animals to improve the landscape, rather than purely considering the grazing lands as a resource for the animals. This change of mindset prioritises the range in decision making, which allows for better ecological outcomes.

The technique draws on inspiration of large wild herds moving through the landscape. Pushed by predators, these herds are constantly kept bunched together and on the move. As they migrate through the range, their manure and hoof impact is concentrated, maximizing disturbance which creates a mulched, fertilised groundcover to the grasslands before the animals move on.

The key principles of Holistic Planned Grazing can be found in the Savory Institute's guidelines for the technique (<https://savory.global/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/about-holistic-planned-grazing.pdf>).

Useful Links

<https://savory.global/>

<https://www.handfortheland.com/about-us>

https://www.ted.com/talks/allan_savory_how_to_fight_desertification_and_reverse_climate_change?language=en

We would like to acknowledge that the information contained within this case study is the intellectual property of Tom's Paddock Pastured Eggs.

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