



# GRASSROOTS CHANGE

SOILS FOR LIFE AIMS TO IMPROVE LAND-MANAGEMENT PRACTICES BY SHARING THE STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL FARMERS.

STORY **JANENE CAREY** PHOTOS **MATT MIEGEL**

Locke Wright moves some of the 7000 sheep on "Lana", north-eastern NSW.

**T**HE FORMER Governor-General of Australia, Major General Michael Jeffery, is standing in a woolshed in northern New South Wales talking about agricultural productivity. He tells the 100-plus crowd that the need for global food security means farming production must rise by 70 percent between now and 2050, despite the challenges of land and water degradation and the gathering storm of climate change. However, the message is overwhelmingly positive – he's confident that pockets of innovative Australian farmers scattered around the country have the answers, and he's on a mission to share what they have learned.

"There's an old military adage that you always reinforce success, never failure," he says. "That's what we want to do; we want to find those people who've been successful, who've managed to realise a triple bottom-line result, and get their messages out loud and clear."

Michael Jeffery is the chair of Soils for Life, a non-profit organisation formed in 2011 to promote regenerative landscape management and sustainable, profitable farming. Soils for Life has documented 19 case studies of agricultural success stories across a range of locations and land-use types, and is now staging field days around the country. On "Lana", a 3350-hectare Northern Tablelands property that carries 7000 sheep and 700 breeding cows, the organisation is showcasing the results of a 20-year experiment by the Wright family that has seen them almost eliminate their reliance on expensive inputs while significantly improving the quality of their soil, vegetation and water resources. At the same time, they have increased wool-clip quality, production levels and profitability.

Tim Wright took control of Lana in the 1980s and continued down the path his father had trodden before him, applying lashings of superphosphate, sowing improved pasture species and pushing stock numbers up. At that time, the property was subdivided into 100ha paddocks, each being grazed for two months then rested for two weeks. But soaring production costs, falling commodity prices and intermittent drought meant Lana was barely turning a profit. Patches of bare ground colonised by weeds, soil erosion and dam sedimentation were all signalling that the landscape was in trouble. "The more fertiliser we put on, the less response we were getting," Tim says. "We started thinking, 'something's not right here'."

After getting good results from a trial of high-density, short-duration grazing, and soaking up information provided by grazing-for-profit and holistic management courses in 1993 and 1995, the Wrights moved to planned grazing within a holistic 'working with nature' framework. ►



Cattle are moved into the small paddocks first, followed by the sheep, with each paddock grazed for only two to three days a season. OPPOSITE: Locke and Tim Wright display Lana's intricate patchwork of paddocks, using coloured counters to show where stock are.

They began erecting more and more fences, gradually increasing the number of paddocks from 30 to 350. Now, each 10–15ha paddock is intensively grazed for two to three days a season, before being rested for 70–80 days. Sheep follow cattle, with the stock functioning as farm machinery for nutrient transfer, pest reduction and seed sowing. “We use the livestock as the tools to enhance the land as well as them being a source of income,” Tim says. “The slasher in their teeth, the plough in their feet and the fertiliser equipment in the rear.”

It was a radical departure from conventional farming practice, and Tim says that initially “many people thought we were stupid”. But the results, 20 years on, are remarkable, and have been well documented by University of New England and Landcare research projects. Organic matter in the soil has more

than doubled, groundcover sits on 100%, and abundant palatable summer and winter native pasture species mean no hay or grain supplementation is ever required. Pests such as pinrush and blackberry have been outcompeted. No fertilisers are used, but natural levels of phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium have increased because of the rest factor, the accumulation of litter, and the transfer of nutrients off the sheep camps. Creeks and dams are sparkling clean and the soil retains so much moisture that the property is effectively drought-proof. And production costs are down by 40% due to savings on labour, machinery and chemicals.

James Bell, 27, who works with his parents on “Farleigh”, a 1200ha property near Armidale, attended the field day because for years he’d been hearing about what the Wrights were doing on Lana and wanted to see it in action. “They’re trailblazers in



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BEC BALLARD, SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND LANDCARE

Major General Michael Jeffery (centre) launching a new book by professors Nick Reid and David Norton, *Nature and Farming: Sustaining Native Biodiversity in Agricultural Landscapes*, which has "Lana" as a case study.

this field," James says. "In terms of the bottom line, you only have to look at the figures. They're running more stock there now than they were 25 years ago, with fewer inputs. You can't get better than that. The really nice part about it is that conservation outcomes don't have to clash with profit outcomes."

On Farleigh, the Bells run 500 Angus breeders, 70 stud horses, and a fluctuating number of goats as a biological control for blackberry and saffron thistles. They have a copy of *Holistic Management* by Allan Savory in their office and have experimented a little with paddock sizes, including dividing a 40ha paddock into three. "You wouldn't call what we've done holistic - I think you'd call it rotational grazing," James says. "But we've seen some real tangible benefits with the amount of stock that same area can now carry, because we're resting two-thirds of it at any one time."

James came away from Lana impressed by what he had seen, particularly the abundance of pasture given that no rain had fallen for a month. However, he feels there are significant barriers to full-scale adoption. "One of the difficulties with this approach is the infrastructure," he says. "Having that much fencing is a huge outlay. They say it pays for itself within two years. So if you're brave enough to make the leap, hopefully it pays off."

Concern about the capital costs involved is a common reaction, says Soils for Life board member Alasdair MacLeod. "We would say just do it at your own pace. Start with one fence and build your confidence as you go."

Alasdair has farming interests in Yass, Ebor and Walcha, NSW, and his agricultural advisor, Bert Glover, is currently overseeing a move to more sustainable management of the properties. According to Bert, it is better to proceed in small

steps, because there is no single recipe for success and farmers need to experiment to find what works best on their land. "The learning process really starts as you implement it," Bert says.

As well as being chaired by a former vice-regal representative, Soils for Life has a high-powered board populated by influential members of the agriculture, media, banking and education sectors. Former Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig flew in for the Lana field day, and then Prime Minister Julia Gillard appointed Michael Jeffery as Australia's first Advocate for Soils. The ex-military man believes his mission to fix paddocks from the ground up while also working top-down to advocate for better landscape management policies is "eminently achievable" within a 10 to 15-year time frame.

"The challenges for those on the land are considerable, but so are the opportunities," he says. "The opportunities lie within what our landscape can deliver if we get its management right. That 'right' can vary from region to region and from enterprise to enterprise, but the principles are generally consistent; they are founded on healthy soils, wise water use, and conservation and biodiversity of vegetation, managed in an integrated way."

### SOILS FOR LIFE

The Soils for Life organisation aims to facilitate positive and sustained change in how the Australian landscape is managed to ensure a thriving natural environment for all Australians.  
Phone: (02) 6230 5600  
[www.soilsforlife.org.au](http://www.soilsforlife.org.au)

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