

A case for conservation farming

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Charlie, Angelica & Lilla Arnott



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Boorowa Southern Tablelands, NSW

Total area farmed: 2, 127 ha

Pasture cropping only since 2006

Charlie Arnott took out the regional finalist award for the Lachlan Catchment in the 2010 Conservation Farmer of the Year Award. Like the 2009 winner of the award (and last month's case study), John Ive, Charlie Arnott's principle enterprise is livestock, in particular cattle.

However, his attitude and approach to managing his landscape are similar to that of many conservation croppers. Like many who think like Charlie, groundcover is paramount, not only for the health and sustainability of his pastures, but for the health of his soils.

Farming across three properties 10 kilometres north-east of Boorowa, Charlie describes his district as a "relatively safe cropping area" with an average 625 millimetres of rain annually, however the decision to move the family farming operation out of cropping 300 – 500 hectares six years ago was driven as much by personal motivations as it was from a hard-headed business perspective.

"Financially it was a good decision for us, making our country more resilient to drought conditions and situations that are out of our control. While Boorowa is fairly safe in terms of cropping windows, I still didn't like the lack of control I had with cropping. Personally, I also prefer cattle as an enterprise," Charlie explained.

Today, the Arnott family, under the management eye of Dick Richardson, run 600 Yamburgan and Weebollabolla Shorthorn breeders.

"We're producing a full grass-fed, ready to be slaughtered item. We used to sell into AMH and Cargill feedlots, but our philosophy is the most nutritious beef is grass-fed and we're trying to supply that to a growing grass-fed consumer market."

The only cropping done now is a small area of about 50 hectares of oats and wheat "scratched" into pasture every couple of years, on red basalt and light pipe clay soils.

"We started doing that about four years ago for pasture rejuvenation and to stimulate change in pasture succession, composition and quantity," said Charlie.

"We use a converted 20 foot John Shearer combine. We lifted the box on it and fiddled around so it could handle going through thick stubble and pasture."

Part of Charlie's motivation to get out of cropping was his desire to be chemical free. There were also the overheads to consider, however, the personal motivations for the change were the main drivers.

"We're not spraying out our grasses before we pasture crop either, preferring to graze those pastures heavily.

"The type of conservation farming principles we're following here is retaining groundcover, retaining perennial species wherever we can. We'll always have

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annuals in the system, and they have their place, but we want a larger percentage of our pastures to be perennials for that groundcover as well as productivity,” said Charlie.

The pasture mix on the Arnott’s property is currently the conventional mix of improved species on the western country, which used to be cropped. Country that used to be cropped but was not resown with pastures, was left for a range of reasons, including to see what pasture succession would occur.

“It’s slow, but the more cattle you can put through, stimulating different pastures to grow, the faster it goes. If you locked that country up it would go nowhere. It’s about managing the stock on any pasture to produce a less fragile and more productive system.

“We are seeing the reintroduction of improved pasture in there; a lot of that cropping country was originally perennial pastures anyway. We’ve also got natives moving in and there are plenty of annuals in there. But over the years we’re seeing a shift from an ex-cropping, annual-based pasture into a perennial pasture.

“We also have a fair bit of native pasture on country we haven’t touched and they do have their place in our grazing program.”

Charlie said there has not been much done with soil monitoring to date, but there are plans in place to see soil monitoring take a bigger role in monitoring the systems on the property.

“We’re about to start monitoring closely the soil improvement of organic matter and chemistry of the soil with university students working on research programs.

“We’re quite involved with a number of institutions, allowing them access to our paddocks and grazing regimes.”

It is this work on soil monitoring that Charlie is hoping will show that what they are doing on-farm is making a difference with soil carbon.

The Arnott’s business is underpinned by the philosophy of producing highly nutritious food and Charlie believes the enterprise shift over the past few years has brought them closer to being more in control of that.

“The way we monitor our pasture growth, the amount of feed we have on hand and our stock numbers; we have flexibility in our system so we can destock and restock ahead of time. It puts us in a more proactive position for drought and the weather.

“We as farmers have more control over our landscape and its productivity and its capacity to adapt to changes in climate at a very local level. I question our ability to change climate at a global level though. My immediate interest and focus is on what I can do to ensure my landscape and my environment, and all the animals and plants that I manage in it, is as adaptable and resilient as I can make it.”

Last month Charlie Arnott and Dick Richardson were announced as the joint winner of the 2011 Carbon Cockey Award for Outstanding Leadership.

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