

The Use Of Old Man Saltbush

For Drought Preparedness

Old man Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*) is a drought hardy, native Australian fodder species. It has been well documented as early as the 1860's by Baron von Mueller that this was a most valuable fodder plant species for the Australian grazing industry. All our own work to date over the last 27 years only further reinforces von Mueller's findings.

The key drought management advantages of using OMSB as a fodder reserve are;

- Large amounts of green leafed, high protein fodder can be carried cost effectively into dry time & since protein is one of the highest fodder cost this is a most valuable advantage.
- Drought fodder reserves regenerate with no further costs.
- As a guide, every hectare planted in the 400 – 500 mm rainfall zone will produce the equivalent of 4,000 DSE (dry sheep equivalent) grazing days per grazing. Grazing periods are generally every 8 to 10 months.
- While subsoil moisture is available (to a depth of 3 metres) OMSB will keep making strong regrowth during dry times.
- During wet periods speed & capacity of soil water infiltration rates are improved considerably & to depth.
- Soil carbon levels increase in the soil - along with the associated increase in water & nutrient holding capacity of the soil.
- Creates the ability to retain core breeding stock on drought properties cost effectively.
- OMSB reserves provide the opportunity to destock grassed areas after opening rains- hence allowing the grasses to re-establish quickly & without stock chasing green shoots. If this management option is used on grass country it can effectively double carrying capacity.
- Grazing land can be managed environmentally at a higher level during drought periods.
- Critical ground cover can be maintained while still having the ability of keeping core breeding stock on the property.
- Strategic OMSB plantings will allow for reduced wind movement across properties whilst creating shelter for both the land & animals.
- Generally just 5% of the grazing area planted to OMSB will provide enough grazing capacity for maintaining the option of drought preparedness.
- Landholders need to be encouraged to plan in the good times to establish OMSB so they have a reserve for the dry periods.
- Planting OMSB as a drought management tool is both sound economically & ecologically.
- Properties with substantial plantings emerge from drought periods financially stronger.

All these benefits have been further supported by various CSIRO work & a number of State Agriculture Departments.

Ways of encouraging & assisting landholders to establish OMSB as a productivity & drought management tool need to be put in place. Allowing such things as a 150% tax deduction in year of expenditure & availability to long-term, low interest loans would give considerable encouragement to land owners to move towards preparing for drought, whilst creating a sounder commercial & ecological footing.

OMSB is too valuable a tool not to be used for drought preparedness & advancing grazing performance. It can possibly be one of the most cost effective approaches any landholder can use as a drought management aid, especially when combined with water point enhancement, fencing & land management education.

These new areas of thinking, planning & land management for the grazing sector, can create a whole new outcome for both drought management & future property income. Encouragement for landholders to plan & be prepared for both dry times & droughts is the first step towards lifting the economic & ecological wellbeing of our rural industries.