



Your Levy at Work

Trees Benefit Sale Dairy Farm

Russell and Maxine Napper Sale, Gippsland Victoria

- 70 hectares (60 pastures)
- 220 dairy cows
- On this farm since 1982
- Macalister Irrigation District (MID)/
Lake Wellington Catchment



‘ I maintain that I have an obligation to leave the land in a better condition than I found it in, and I can quite happily say that I've done that. ’

Russell Napper's family has done well out of the land around Sale. From his great-great-grandfather, who made a fortune selling supplies to diggers on the way to the Gippsland goldfields, to Russell's present day dairy farm, the district has been kind to successive generations of Nappers. But when salt started to creep to the surface of Russell's property just east of Sale township, he knew it was time to start giving back to the land.

It was in the early 1990s when a routine inspection of a bore revealed the water table had risen to dangerously high levels. Russell has seen it all before and knew that if nothing was done, some of the best farming land in Australia would soon become barren. "I can remember in 1961 the paddock over the road from my school turned black after we had a wet winter," he said. "Back in the 1950s, irrigation was extended to Nambrok for soldier settlement and within three years the water table rose 20 feet." "The bottom end of Nambrok just turned black." It was indiscriminate land clearing combined with irrigation on farms that was causing salinity.

Russell believed that it was the re-introduction of trees that would allow the land to heal itself. "There was a problem here and the question was what are we going to do about it?" he said. "We knew that one of the things that would help was getting some native vegetation back."

Hearing about a salinity trial program called Joint Action Salt Action, Russell began the first of many tree plantings that have transformed his farm into a shining example of what can be achieved through planned farm management.

After patchy early results, Russell helped form the Clydebank Landcare Group and started to get the right plants for his property. "We did some first direct seeding trials in the area. And that was quite successful in '91/ '92," he said.

With the growing trees thirstily sucking up water, the water-table started to recede. The addition of a groundwater pump (one of several in the area) has seen vast areas of formerly unproductive land returned to verdant dairy pasture.

The pumps were funded with government assistance and are maintained through a levy on irrigation water. Russell has not only worked to improve his own land, but has been an active member of various committees and boards like the Wellington Salinity Community Group and is currently a Southern Rural Water committee member. Russell has watched from the dairy shed and the boardroom as successful land reclamation projects changed attitudes to salinity, which was once a taboo subject among many farmers.

He even remembers a time when speaking publicly on local radio about his own farm's salinity problem raised the hackles of some fellow farmers. "One of the neighbours complained and I thought, well he reckons 2000 dollars an acre has just been taken off his property. This was the prevailing attitude at the time. Another neighbour up the road had a lot of salt on his property but he would just flatly deny it to anybody except me." But times and attitudes have changed, as has the ability of the irrigation community to tackle the salt issue.

For Russell and many others, owning prime irrigation land brings with it a responsibility to the wider environment. "I maintain that I have an obligation to leave the land in a better condition than I found it in, and I can quite happily say that I've done that."

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Tree planting is clearly visible on the Napper's farm east of Sale. This photo was taken prior to the salinity problem being addressed. The saline area is visible in the lower left hand corner of the property.



Russell sees many benefits to planting trees on his dairy farm - reducing salinity, keeping cows warm and cool, encouraging pasture growth and making it a better place to live and work.



Contented Cows & Productive Pastures

Russell and Maxine Napper believe trees make a better dairy farm. Reducing salinity, keeping cows warm and cool, encouraging pasture growth and making it a better place to live and work is a decent short-list of reasons. "I like trees and I could see the reaction of the dairy cows," Russell said. "On a stinking hot day in a paddock without trees they'll all crowd around the trough - the dominant cows will get in, whereas the heifers won't get anywhere near it. Whereas when you have trees, the dominant cows might take all the shade but at least then the younger ones get access to water."

Both Russell and Maxine, who are very mindful of animal welfare on their farm, believe trees are the single most important factor in maintaining a happy herd. "On a very hot or very cold day I can say that the cows are clearly happier in a paddock with trees in it," Russell said.

Having contented cows, however, hasn't meant a drop in production but instead has seen cows better able to cope with extremes of temperatures, while pastures thrive in the shelter afforded by planned plantings. "You see a cow on a hot day standing there panting and you wonder how much energy she is using trying to stay cool," Russell said. "But if she's feeling comfortable she will go out and have a bit of a graze then come back."

In a tough industry, looking out for the bottom line is vital if farmers want to keep their heads above water. But Russell maintains that giving land over to trees has seen pasture - and potential profitability - grow significantly.

Since the start of his planting program, he said there has been a threefold increase in dry-matter consumed per hectare.

Put simply, better care of the land has resulted in a better outcome in milk production. "We produce 1.5 million litres of milk off 60 hectares - that's about as productive as anywhere."



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