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# SEAVIEW FARM

19<sup>th</sup> March 2009

The Secretary  
Primary Industries and Resources Committee  
House of Representatives  
P.O. Box 6021  
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 260

Dear Sir/Madam,

We would like to address the terms of reference for the inquiry but rather than address them discretely they will be incorporated into our narrative. We will simply relate our own experience on our property and the practices we have used in the past few years that have helped increase production, that have given several degrees of drought protection and that ultimately will mean a reduction in costs.

The references listed at the end of this letter are some of the resources we have used which hopefully will add to the credibility of what we are saying.

The average rainfall on this property - records for which have been kept since 1929 - has been 40 inches. That is until 2006 when the rainfall for the year was 16 inches - the lowest ever. Since that year this has improved slightly but in 2008 we were still 20% down on the expected average. We do not know, nor cannot predict if this is the pattern of things to come.

As a result of this drought not only were we surrounded by the first bushfire in living memory that decimated the local forests as well as destroying homes and other properties, we also were faced with getting our stock through summer, autumn and winter of 2007.

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This last year has been the first in several that we have cut hay and even then the number of bales cut was way below the norm of past years.

We grow not only beef (80 head) and lamb but also blueberries (3,000 bushes) and honey. We also have a small accommodation business. We discovered a few years ago that diversification was necessary to survive.

We managed to get our stock through the 2006-07 summer and autumn with very little loss of condition as compared with our next door neighbour whose cattle looked like impoverished dairy cows that he was forced to sell at a low price.

The main reason we believe we got the cattle through an extremely dry period was that a year or so previously we had switched to biological farming a definition of which is:

‘a system of farming that combines the best of chemistry, physics and biology with sound farm management practices;

a system of farming that works to solve weed, disease and insect pest problems at their *root causes* rather than using poisonous chemicals in an attempt to eliminate the ‘symptoms’; and,

a system of farming that seeks ways to intelligently improve yield, quality, food nutrition and profit’. (‘Hybrid-Ag’ - Product Information Guide June 2006.)

Therefore, the quality of the feed they did get was superior to that of our next door neighbour, or even the feed on this property before we began this kind of farming.

We start by testing the soil and also getting a leaf analysis for the blueberries. We then get a complete report listing all the important minerals indicating which one is deficient, adequate or oversupplied. This can vary from area to area all over the farm.

One of the discoveries made when we first began soil testing was that this property had extremely high levels of phosphate which ties up other elements which then need unlocking. This had been the result of years of over use of super phosphate by previous owners.

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Some fertilizers we use are liquid seaweed, brown coal ash, aglime, all the trace elements, humic and fulvic acid, compost teas with potassium and the different nitrogens as required. This year, if finance allows, we will spread 50 tonnes of compost to help raise the humus levels in some poorer areas of the property.

The basic philosophy that underscores this method is that if the soil is healthy and rich in humus, bacteria and fungi and the mineral content is appropriately sufficient then all else follows. Getting the balance right corrects weed and insect problems and reduces the need for pesticides and herbicides to almost nil. We have neither used pesticides for several years nor have we had any veterinary bills or costly drenches and mineral supplements.

The results we have observed are as follows:

- (a) increased production of clover both red and white;
- (b) reduction in weeds: for example a paddock we referred to as the thistle paddock for its metre high scotch thistles which covered the whole area, now contains only one or two without resort to herbicides;
- (c) increased humus level in the blueberry paddock to 11%; this compares with mainland Australia where the humus levels can be as low as 1.5%
- (d) no need for pesticides. The only real pest was a plague of earwigs in the blueberry paddock which were controlled with Neem oil whereas the slugs and snails are controlled by a large flock of ducks;
- (d) with increased humus levels and soil health the ability to retain moisture has substantially increased. Any moisture - heavy dew, mists, or light rain is now retained in the soil. Our property has the advantage of rich red soil but whereas before it would dry out very rapidly especially with winds it now stays greener and more lush than other properties that have had the same rainfall.
- (e) healthier stock with less need for added mineral supplements. Also

veterinary bills are virtually non-existent;

- (f) greatly increased shelf life of blueberries (we have some in the fridge that are still very edible after being picked five weeks ago) with the

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correct application of silicon.

The program we have been following has been a very steep learning curve. My husband has thoroughly researched this farming practice (which is several decades old - nothing new at all. In fact some of the practices are probably hundreds of years old but the scientific knowledge wasn't available then to know what it all meant) and attended courses and seminars. He has purchased numerous books (a short list in references) and still continues to study, learn and put this to practical use.

He even purchased a microscope with a 2000 magnification in order to check out the bacteria and fungi levels in the compost tea he makes.

Not only have we learnt how better to farm but the human health component has greatly improved our health and fitness. (We are 66 and 67 years old).

#### Role of Government

Although ultimately this switch to biological farming will be less costly than using the usual chemical methods (which mean the more you use the more you need to use), it is initially expensive. But the benefits to the nation as a whole by adopting these methods could be enormous. A positive and as yet uncalculated side affect would undoubtedly be an improvement in the general health of the population of the nation with a subsequent massive reduction in health costs.

Therefore, it seems logical for the federal government to subsidize farmers, or at least provide educational assistance to learn these alternative methods. If they are willing to make these changes then initially at least also assist them financially. For instance a farmer who increases the humus level in his soils should be rewarded as this alone provides some degree of protection against drought.

Giving incentives is important. Promoting research is not vital as there is a mountain of information already there for the taking. Just refer to it.

The dissemination of this knowledge and positively encouraging the use as standard practice may help usually conservative farmers to look at an alternative way rather than treading the increasingly barren chemical path.

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We like the story of two farmers in North East Tasmania (not us!) One follows a similar philosophy and practice as ours. His paddocks are rich and green, his stock healthy.

Just across the fence another farmer has poor pastures and has to resort to pesticides and herbicides just to keep control of the place. It is necessary to give his cattle bullets of mineral supplements whereas the other farmer does not.

And yet, the farmer with the poor paddocks with simply a fence separating the two never asks "What are you doing that I am not?"

It doesn't matter what you call it: biological, biodynamic, organic or a mixture of all three, if it works use it! And if we are looking at the effects of climate change and how to promote resilience then there is an urgent need to change current farming practices which largely dominate the thinking in agricultural circles today.

We sincerely hope there are those on your committee who will take some time to look at the information available - a small example of which is listed in the references - and not regard it as some alternative clap trap. It is an approach that is gaining ground even in mainstream farming communities simply because it makes good sense, it does work, and in the long term is cost effective.

For too long much arable land in Australia has been abused and there are areas of almost irretrievable damage, especially vulnerable when a drought occurs, but it can be turned around. We have seen it occur first hand and whether it is on a two, two hundred or two thousand hectare block these principles we have outlined can be applied with great success.

Sincerely,

Julia Weston

**USEFUL REFERENCES**

- ‘Nutrition Rules’ Graeme Sait, Pub. Soil Therapy Pty. Ltd. Australia**
- ‘Tuning in to Nature’, Philip S. Callahan, Phd. Pub. Acres USA**
- ‘Soil Fertility and Animal Health’, William A. Albrecht, Phd., Pub. Acres USA**
- ‘The Secret Life of Compost’, Malcolm Beck, Pub. Acres USA**
- ‘From the Soil Up’, Donald Schriefer, Pub. Acres USA**
- ‘Agriculture in Transition’, Donald Schriefer, Pub. Acres USA**
- ‘Science in Agriculture’ Dr. Arden Anderson**
- ‘Hands on Agronomy’, Neil Kensey and Charles Walters**
- ‘The Biological Farmer’ Gary F. Zimmer**
- Nutri Tech Solutions, Yandina, Queensland**
- Regular monthly magazine ‘Nutrition Matters’**
- Hybrid Ag – Hybrid Industries trading as Hybrid Ag, Wangaratta, Victoria**
- Product Information Guide – Biological, Physical, Chemical -  
Minerals, Microbes, Humates, Botanicals**
- ‘The Non-Toxic Farming Handbook’ Philip A. Wheeler and Ronald R. Ward**
- ‘The Three-Up Tour – Nutrition Farming Explained’, Garry Zimmer, Gerry  
Brunetti & Graeme Sait**
- Acres USA website**