Saltbush looms as answer to graziers' woes

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THE solution to the multitude of problems Australian land managers are facing — salinity, soil loss, greenhouse gas emissions, drought, achieving profitability — could be close at hand.

In the early 1980s grazier Alan Lauder noticed on his property at Cunnamulla in western Queensland that when the saltbush disappeared "that is when the sheep suddenly didn't perform".

An oldtimer from the Riverina told him how they kept a saltbush paddock locked up until drought hit. Then they would rotate the whole flock through it.

"He told me when they went back in the paddocks they were actually performing better without rain, after being in the saltbush."

First Mr Lauder tried to get natural regeneration of saltbushes. In 1994 he learnt saltbush can be planted commercially and worked out a method of planting it cheaply.

With some government funds, he set to work learning how to manage saltbush, and found the key: rest.

"It is frost resistant, drought resistant and is not eaten by kangaroos, which makes it a drought reserve," he said.

"The fact it wasn't very palatable meant that it was there when you needed it.

"So what they said were all the negatives suddenly became all the positives.

'We interfered with how nature functions. I am only trying to reverse the process'

Alan Lauder
Grazier

Nature designed a system that was completely consistent with what we needed. We just didn't understand what nature had given us."

Mr Lauder found that putting stock on saltbush after rain, and thereby strategically "resting" the usual pasture and giving it the chance to regenerate, was vital.

"When nature chooses to regenerate and grow, that is when we have to back off, and the significance of saltbush is it is available as a resting tool, through its drought resistance. That is the secret."

Not only was the country, with its high, variable rainfall, able to regenerate after drought, but it became more productive and the percentage of palatable perennial grasses increased.

And the high protein content of the saltbush meant that, despite the drought, was able to run a good-sized flock, with high lambing percentages. "I maintained production through those marginal conditions because I had an ongoing protein source."

Salinity results when deep-rooted perennial native plants, having used virtually all the rainfall, are replaced with shallow-rooted annuals which are less efficient water users.

The unused water seeps into the water table, raising it and its dissolved salts.

Saltbush — a perennial with roots going down as deep as many trees — clearly provides one solution. What is more, it acts as a carbon sink, and it could possibly be used to earn greenhouse credits.

Mr Lauder continued his observations. He saw the trees storing moisture underneath them, dropping leaf litter, and the saltbush germinating in that environment. And he found the saltbush actually improved soil structure.

"Every time I discovered something I used to ring a scientist up and he used to fill me in on the science behind my observation. I couldn't have worked it out on my own."

He has written papers, spoken at a number of conferences on saltbush and is keen to spread the word in the grazing community.

Mr Lauder believes he has designed a new farming system, one that is not only sustainable but — most importantly — profitable.

"Once you work out how the whole landscape functions, you then find one solution for all problems," he said.

"The reason we have greenhouse, salinity, lack of biodiversity is because we stepped in as mankind and we interfered with how nature functions. I am only trying to reverse the process."