

# FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW

How the 'Small Farms Planning' program has shaped farming practices in Southern Tasmania



2018

**In the five years that NRM South has been running an annual Small Farm Planning program, we have provided advice and training to 137 participants on 82 properties in the Huon and Channel regions, representing productive land management strategies implemented across 1,482 hectares.**

As part of a regular evaluation process, a survey was sent out in September 2017 to participants\* of the Small Farm Planning program (from 2012-2016) to assess how the course had influenced land management practices on their properties.

The aim of the survey was to not only find out if and how the course had changed the approach that attendees were using to manage their properties, but also to bring to light any measurable benefits that had been observed as a result of these changes.

Results from the survey showed that the workshops played an important role in influencing practice change amongst participants, with 80% of

\* The survey received responses from 21 properties (a 40% response rate). Of these respondents 62% described themselves as hobby farmers, 24% as farmers and 14 % not a farmer.

respondents actively implementing practices, changing their approach or continuing to seek professional advice since completing the course.

Survey responses indicate that the program has helped participants in their decision-making and be more strategic about managing their properties. Many respondents have described the challenges of 'not knowing where to start' when faced with a multiple issues, and spending considerable time on problem areas without making much headway. The main benefits of the course were hearing from key experts, getting hands-on experience, learning how to identify problems and where to get more information.

Improvements to the way properties are being managed is having far-reaching environmental, economic and social benefits. The majority (81%) of respondents reported either a reduction in weeds or better weed management through changes to grazing practices, better understanding of control techniques and development of weed plans. Nearly half of respondents saw improvements to pasture health while other noted benefits included improvements to soil health, native vegetation and biosecurity practices.

Another associated benefit of the program has been the creation of networks in the production

community - almost all respondents have continued to sustain these networks through regular interactions that include sharing resources, insights, challenges and expertise.

Small farms have different needs to larger properties and this program has been designed specifically for properties up to 100 hectares. The popularity of small farms in southern Tasmania, nestled within a landscape that still retains many areas of native bushland, means that this program is helping to build a network of cooperative land management strategies across broader production landscapes.

Feedback from individual program evaluations has been very positive and highly rated. Annual programs have been consistently oversubscribed, demonstrating the ongoing need for this program model in Southern Tasmania.

*"Doing this course was the best single thing we've done in the development of our property"*

*"It's a brilliant course! The peace of mind and confidence you get from having a clear objective and the knowledge on how to get there has really helped us manage our property. It's also been great to follow the course up with various NRM field days and seminars"*



Matthew Tack



Kirsten Kuns

## 2016 WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS Matthew Tack and Coreen Ung

Taking over an unmanaged apple orchard on 32 hectares in 2013, Matthew and Coreen were faced with neglected fruit trees, paddocks of grass that resembled astroturf and blackberry thickets reaching over three metres high. Their certified organic farm now uses sheep, cattle and pigs to manage pastures through rotational grazing.

*"The biggest challenge was that we didn't know where to start. We didn't know anything about our soil, our grass, our native species or about our weeds" - Matthew Tack.*

Not only did the PMP course fill in many of those knowledge gaps, it also gave Matthew and Coreen a framework for making decisions - from how to go about improving the soil to controlling weeds and conserving water.

The biggest change they've seen over the last two years has been to their pasture - transformed from bare ground to a thick coverage of grass with high species diversity. Matthew has observed that this dense grass structure helps to retain moisture, build good quality soil, attracts beneficial insects and improves pasture recovery time

*"Building soil is key to a healthy system and you need organic matter to do that."*

While this type of pasture would be seen by many farmers as messy and unmanaged, Matthew notes that changing to this kind of

pasture management requires a shift in mindset. The end result is that they can now manage stock better, no longer buy feed and can have more cattle in, and for shorter periods. This is better for the soil and pastures and improves feed conversion - and has only been made possible because of the type of pastures they have created. Understanding their pasture lets them plan ahead and get in the right number of animals for the season and conditions.

More than a specific set of skills and knowledge, Matthew and Coreen feel the biggest advantage was that it provided a framework for them to know how to identify problems. The non-prescriptive nature of the PMP course meant that it could be adapted to their own individual scenario rather than following a strict formula for decision making.

## 2014 WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS Kirsten Kuns and Andrew Pinner

**Grazing horses on small parcels of land requires careful management to avoid soil and pasture degradation and often incurs significant costs when buying in extra feed.**

Kirsten and Andrew own a four-hectare recreational hobby farm where they graze cattle and horses. Some of the main challenges they were facing prior to completing the course included a lack of grass, a lot of grazing wallabies and weed infestations that were not responding to control methods.

They were looking for a system that made the best use of their time,

and a setup that would work for them, and their animals.

Since implementing a rotational grazing plan, their original five paddocks have been modified into 17 smaller cells that feed off a central hard standing area where there is shelter, water, feeding and care. This setup means they can now rest pastures from five to seven months - and no longer have to harrow manure into their fields. Where a paddock has been "sacrificed" to protect the rest of the paddocks during a tough season they have had it fully recover with rest and the broadcast of additional manure.

One of the most significant lessons that stood out from the course was that excluding wallabies was the best way to manage pasture. They also learned that they could retrofit their existing boundary fence and have since installed wallaby fencing around their property boundary.

Their pastures have responded well to these changes and they now have more grass, use less hay and have seen a reduction in weeds and parasite egg counts in their horses.

They now understand grass and pastures better, the soil conditions that support a good pasture and how to use their animals to drive the health of the property.

*"Since doing the property planning course, we now have a plan to make the property work for us so that it requires minimal effort on our behalf for it to deliver what we require for our horses." - Kirsten Kuns.*

A short video featuring interviews with several landowners who completed the Small Farm Planning course is available to [view here](#).