Saltland Management – The place of pastures

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The place of pastures in saltland management in the Upper South East is critical in terms of both economics and sustainability. Agronomy is a dominant feature of the Upper South East Dryland Salinity & Flood Management Plan (USEDS&FMP) and consists of two major parts

1. To make money through the utilisation of saltland, rehabilitated saltland adjacent to drains and the high ground. Eg. Puccinellia, tall wheat grass, salt-tolerant clovers and lucerne.
2. Reduction of localised recharge via increased water use through the use of perennial pastures (most specifically lucerne), phase-farming and clay-spreading.

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The Upper South East Environment and Pastures

- Assessed to be 250,000Ha of salinity affected land.
- Saline country is generally sand over clay, with some clay flats.
- Landholders suffer the twin effects of both salinity and inundation.
- Construction of drains is a critical part of managing waterlogging and salinity of agricultural land and management of wetland systems.
- Very saline and/or waterlogged country is sown to puccinellia
- Low to moderately saline country has a greater choice of pasture options and soil salinity sampling is recommended to determine these.
- Landholders have taken up the saltland agronomy component with a vengeance, with approximately 67% of identified saltland in a phone survey being established to saltland pastures.
- With deep non-wetting sands a feature – lucerne and other perennial pastures is an economic as well as an environmental choice with livestock industries still the dominant industry in the region.
- Amelioration of non-wetting sands by clay-spreading has also taken off with significant financial and environmental benefits.
- Constructed drains are working so effectively landholders are looking to pastures other than salt-tolerant puccinellia and tall wheat grass. We are, however, in the learning stages of what the new agricultural environment will be.

The system

This is not just about making saltland pastures work, it is about making saltland systems work, of which saltland pastures is a part. We are aiming for sustainability in resource terms, but also economic. The aim is to take into account production, but also water use efficiency, feed utilisation and the effects on salinity and the health of the land.

The rules for Saltland Management

- Increase you farm water use efficiency.
- Soil sample for salinity prior to any pasture renovation.
- Also consider limiting factors such as waterlogging and pH as well as your livestock system needs (if you have some options) when choosing pastures.
- Establish saltland pastures with weed control and adequate fertiliser as you would any other pasture.
- Utilise saltland pastures appropriately, managing for economics as well as resource health.
- Construct on-farm drains with due consideration to pasture tolerance and also to the health of your conservation 'wetland' areas.